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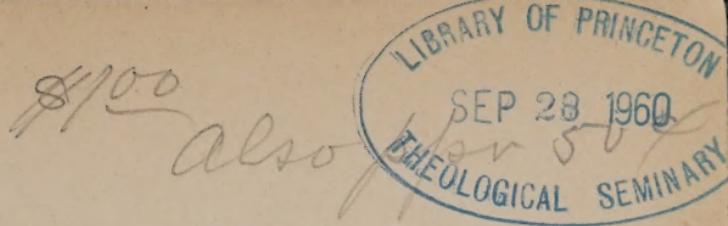
Rev. James M. Moffett

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Personal creeds







# PERSONAL CREEDS

OR

HOW TO FORM A WORKING-THEORY  
OF LIFE

BY

NEWMAN SMYTH

“ And simple trust can find Thy ways  
We miss with chart of creeds ”

WHITTIER

NEW YORK  
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1890

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## *PREFACE.*

*THESE eight discourses concerning personal creeds grew together from one idea. As a single cluster which has ripened upon a fruitful principle of faith, they are offered in this book to the larger public, with the hope that they may reach those men, of whom there are many in these times, who cannot believe everything that they have been taught, but who would not miss the best faiths which are implied in man's truest life.*

*N. S.*

*New Haven, Conn., April, 1890.*



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I.

MORAL BEGINNINGS.

*But him that is weak in faith receive ye, yet not to  
doubtful disputations.* — ROMANS xiv. 1.

## I.

### MORAL BEGINNINGS.

HOW to form a personal creed? I do not have in mind the formulation of a church creed. One whole denomination, indeed, is now engaged with that question; for the Divine Providence — nothing less than Providence — has finally brought the Presbyterian Church in this country to earnest and truthful dealing with its Confession, and the religious problem now before that denomination is the revision of its creed. It is not, however, concerning the formation or the reformation of the creed of a denomination of Christians of which I wish now to speak; rather, I am thinking of the way in which a man may seek to grow into some faith which shall be his real personal creed.

Neither will my subject permit me to be directly concerned with that other provi-

dential task which is gaining recognition in all churches among thoughtful Christian men ; viz., how shall our different confessions be so thoroughly sifted and winnowed that there may be left as the pure result some general or ecumenical creed for all the Protestant communions ? Not long since, a conference between certain eminent churchmen and non-conformists was held in England for this purpose of finding out and stating simply and clearly in what articles of faith they agreed, and in what they disagreed. But I would turn, in these discourses, from this large, distant prospect of church unity, or only glance at moments wistfully away towards it, while I concentrate our attention mainly upon this near, personal concern, how can one of us form his personal creed for life and death ?

This subject should be discriminated, also, from another matter with which it is too often confused, but which is quite different, although it lies not far from it ; viz., how can a man gain correct religious opinions, or become the possessor of an enlight-

ened theological intelligence? To one who reverences Biblical scholarship, and whose reading has carried him largely outside of any provincial theology, there may come at times the temptation to speak some severe things concerning the theological ignorance, mounting often to intolerance, of such dogmatists as are happily characterized in these words of an apostle: "Desiring to be teachers of the law, though they understand neither what they say, nor whereof they confidently affirm." But leaving such words as better unsaid, or reserving them only for occasions when regard for the rights and liberties of the faith of others makes it the Christian thing to speak them, I would seek in these sermons to direct our thoughts to this matter of immediate and vital importance to any man of us: How, amid the diversities of beliefs and unbeliefs in the world, shall I gain a living, personal creed? how shall I form my working-theory of life?

There are two classes of people in our congregations who may welcome any practical suggestions or help in this vital mat-

ter. The first are some elderly people. The latter class comprises almost all young people of thoughtfulness or sincerity. There are some of the older people in our congregations, who, years ago, when they were in the formative period of their religious life, fell between the different teachings by which the churches were then divided. Educated in the midst of great doctrinal discussions, they came to no definite religious confession. They grew up devout at heart and conformists to some local church in practice, but comparatively creedless. “In my early life,” so in substance said one representative of this class of persons to me lately, “when I was young, each church had its complete set of doctrines; and I used to hear them preached, and the doctrines of other churches preached against. I listened to both sides, and I could not see why one might not be as true as the other. I wanted my children to believe something, and was glad when they did; but I could not seem to come myself to much belief in anything. I suppose it is the way I was made.” Possibly

such was, in a measure, the way that person was made: for some of us are born interrogation-points; other people are born exclamation-points; and but few have the restfulness of a full, finished sentence in their natures; but possibly also that was the way in which overmuch doctrinal discussion has made and left some persons in our congregations. At all events, we find among us some exemplary people who in their old age are still asking that vital question, which one must become as a little child to answer, How shall I trust?

Unlike these persons, both in the conditions under which their lives are forming and in their temper of mind, are the younger men and women, who have in these seething times to settle for themselves their practical, working-creeds of life. In our churches generally there is now little or no catechism imposed upon the young, and they do not have to listen to overmuch doctrinal preaching from our pulpits. But the atmosphere which they breathe is electrical. New sciences bring fresh surprises to their knowledge; and

it seems at times as though the floods had broken loose, all ancient things were cast adrift, and they themselves afloat without anchor or chart. Christian doctrine itself appears to some minds to have dissolved almost into a state of universal fluidity, and many would honestly like to know what to think and to believe. All this is providential, and therefore hopeful;—because this is God's world, and not the devil's, it is always an interesting and hopeful world;—but, these things being so, they bring new duties also to the pulpit and the church. And this first obligation of gaining for one's self a good and sufficient working-theory of life is one not now lightly to be put aside by any man of us.

Yet as I begin to preach on this subject, I am conscious beforehand that what I have in mind to say may seem at first somewhat disappointing to some of you who need most, and who would most willingly receive any suggestion of help or word of light in this matter. For I shall speak of some very simple and elemental things. I shall suggest only some famil-

iar duties. I shall ask you to go back and see once more the face of your real self in the mirror of some early, clear spring of your life. Yet these simple things are the vital things; and if we do not begin with them, all else shall surely prove mistaken. Here, for instance, is this human body with its complicated tissues, its system within system of organic functions — common matter becoming almost etherealized in the marvellous intricacies of the brain. Yet the body is built up of the simplest vital cells. The microscope can hardly distinguish the particles within these transparent circles of elemental being. Chemistry stops there, and cannot search behind these primal cells into the secret of life. When we have to do with vital things, we find always the simplest things. This is as true in the moral order and the spiritual sphere as it is in the physical.

Some verses, for example, in the Gospel of John are so simply divine that you can only repeat them, and can hardly preach from them or teach them, except by hold-

ing them up and looking at them, and letting men see what they are. Everywhere the truest, divinest things are the simplest,—the first and the last, the beginning and the end of our knowledge and our faith,—as God is the Alpha and the Omega of his creation.

Hence when a man has to form a creed for himself, if it is to be a real and vital creed, he may be sure that in its beginnings it will be something very simple. The initial truths of it will be like the vital cells which the biologist finds, of which all the tissues are woven. You must see, therefore, that the first thing for us to do in forming a creed for ourselves is to get down to something elemental, to begin with something so transparently simple, perhaps, that one might think it without significance. Yet that simple truth, if one will trust it, may prove the living element of the whole vigorous and healthful tissue of a man's faith.

One comes and asks, How am I to believe anything? and emphasizes very likely his question by plunging the next

moment into some discussion concerning the Bible, its authorship, its discrepancies, or its inspiration, about which the last magazine article he has glanced through may have enabled him to argue a little; his mind tumbles into a heap of confusion over some hard doctrine, or his reason ventures all his faith-power, and loses it, on the chance of guessing correctly some enigma of Providence. Now my point right here is that, however reasonable, or interesting, many of these questions may be in their own place and time, we have little to do with them when the first thing that we need to be about, if we really wish to win a creed for ourselves, is to go and hunt through our experience until we come to something, however simple, before which we must and do say, "I see that to be true; I believe that; I can trust in that." And this, I insist, is the first thing for a man in search of a real creed to do: to find something, somewhere, which he does believe. Not to believe in everything, but to find something, however elemental, which his own life has proved to

be true to him. And is it too much to say that some such point for faith to begin at can be found in the experience of any ordinary man?

In the initial part of the process of gaining a personal faith, it matters not so much what the particular thing is which a man may find to believe; the first, essential thing for any man who wishes to live a strong life and to do a man's work in the world, is to find something somewhere in his experience of which he can say with all his mind and heart, "That I must believe, or deny my own soul! Whatever else is shapeless, this is rock beneath my feet! That is true as life to me!" For it is of vital importance for us to get hold at some point of the moral reality of things. A young man cannot begin to be a true man until at some point his life takes firm root in the moral realities. There is no solid genuineness in character until one has found a point of crystallization for his life around something which he believes, and which he knows it would be personal disintegration for him to give up. This is

the last difference between those men who are worth something as men in the world, and those who are worthless: the former have taken firm root somewhere in the moral law, and have held on by that faith; the latter have taken root nowhere, and hence have no true life in them. The worthless men, the men who count for nothing, the mere society men whom Pope described as passing from “a youth of frolics to an old age of cards,” are men who never have really believed in anything, who have never fastened their lives with a strong grasp upon any moral reality. Believing in nothing, they are nothing. Trusting in no one, they are themselves not trustworthy. If a man has no deep faith in right or virtue, if he believes in no one, not even with a pure love in his own mother, he can be himself but the creature of circumstance, the slave of chance, a prey for all the devils. It cannot be put too strongly, this absolute necessity for a man’s life to take root somewhere in the moral order. Without this, character becomes a mere leaf in the

wind; it is nothing more fixed and firm than a piece of seaweed floating with the tide. We must as men find something to reverence, to trust, and to obey, or we shall lose the spirit of a man, and become ourselves nothing. Hence any habit which makes virtue herself a joke on a young man's lips, or any course of life which turns truth into a lie in an old man's heart, is virulent poison that has power to kill the soul. A dead branch, fit only for the burning, is the plain Biblical symbol—and it is true to the life—of the man whose hold has been broken on the strong moral order of the universe.

In this it is not yet said at what points, or by what faiths, a man may plant himself in moral truth; my present insistence is in general that we must find something, however simple or elemental, in which we can believe, or our souls will wilt and die. The first thing to be done in forming a living creed is by some such real faith to get into personal contact, if it be only at some single sensitive point, with the whole realm of moral and spiritual truth. Be-

cause if we do not get some touch with reality at the simple beginning of our faith, we shall never come to it at the end of our creeds. If a man, in other words, does not begin somewhere by saying, “That is true; I see that; I believe that, and cannot do otherwise; it would be mental suicide and moral dishonor for me not to hold to that,”— if a man does not begin in this simple and real way with his creed, though he may afterwards spin it out into a whole series of articles of belief, his creed is all the way through empty of reality, a deception to himself, and a vanity before the world.

Now, then, let us seek for some of these simple vital things in which a man’s creed may find its real beginnings. Some of these, I say; for the immediate points of possible attachment of men’s lives to the moral reality and whole spiritual order of God’s universe, are very many, some of them near every one of us, if we will put forth honest hands and grasp them.

A passage in the biography of a rarely gifted modern believer will furnish a help-

ful example of the way a true man's creed must first fasten upon some elemental, moral reality, and then how it may grow from that, and blossom, and bear at length whole clusters of the fruits of the Spirit. "It must be right to do right"; so Frederick W. Robertson, at one time in his religious history, got down to that simple beginning of faith. He had inherited a creed, — the whole articulated creed which he found in the pulpit of the Church of England. I will not pause to quote the words by which, in an address to workingmen, he has described that "awful moment when the soul begins to find that the props on which it has blindly rested so long are, many of them, rotten, and begins to suspect them all; when it begins to feel the nothingness of many of the traditional opinions which have been received with implicit confidence, and in that horrible insecurity begins also to doubt whether there be any thing to believe at all." Rather let me quote these words in which that soul, cast adrift in the darkness, found the point where it could touch reality, and in touch-

ing firm moral truth became sound and strong again. "In the darkest hour," so he wrote, tearing the leaf from the experience of his own heart, "in the darkest hour through which a human soul can pass, whatever else is doubtful, this at least is certain. If there be no God and no future state, yet even then, it is better to be generous than selfish, better to be chaste than licentious, better to be true than false, better to be brave than to be a coward. . . . Thrice blessed is he who,—when all is drear and cheerless within and without, when his teachers terrify him, and his friends shrink from him,—has obstinately clung to moral good. Thrice blessed, because *his* night shall pass into clear, bright day."

Reflect a moment on the logic of the Spirit in that passage of a human life. I admit that it may not have followed any formal logic of the understanding. I admit that between this proposition, "It is better to be generous than selfish, better to be chaste than licentious, better to be true than false, better to be brave than a cow-

ard,"— and this other proposition, There is a God and a future life,— there are several intervening steps for reason carefully to take, or boldly to jump. But whatever may be our formal arguments or painstaking logic in the effort of the understanding to reach belief in the existence of God and in the future life, there is no doubt what was the actual, vital growth upwards of that man's faith from that deep moral root. Once firmly planted in this moral reality which underlies all true life, Robertson's belief soon grew by its own vitality into religious fruitfulness. The logic of the Spirit in the inward but most real processes of his life carried the man from faith in doing right to trust in the God of righteousness. The man in the darkness who had grasped the sure-faith that it is better to be brave than a coward, was already far on the way towards an ennobling and illuminating faith in his God, who is light, and in whom there is no darkness at all. Here, then, is a firm place for any man to begin to build his personal creed. Let but this

conviction become his formative principle of life, which it would be personal dis-honor for him to doubt, that it is better to be generous than selfish, better to be chaste than licentious, better to be brave than a coward. Let a man once get real and firm hold of only so much moral truth as this; let him believe that if in the presence of danger he should flinch from duty, his soul would become afterward its own flaming hell to him; that if at the word of com-mand to leap forward, though death blazed from a whole battery before him to be taken, he could hesitate and fail, his memory of cowardice would become an everlasting torment to him; that if a chiv-alrous word ought to be spoken and his lips should remain closed, if a wrong should appeal to him to be made right, and his arm hang limp by his side, if ever the thought of money, reputation, posi-tion, influence, or reward should bribe his tongue to silence, or tempt him to hide his soul in prudence when it ought to stand forth simply brave, then the recollection of such base denial would make him ashamed

of himself forever, unless indeed he could expiate his cowardice in some trial of fire and come forth a brave soul again;—let a man, I say, thus grasp with all his heart and his whole strength this single sure truth that it is better to be generous than to be selfish, better to be brave than to be a coward, and then see how this truth, to which the man has given himself up wholly, will become as a chariot to his soul,—a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, like the chariot in which Elijah went up as by a whirlwind into heaven. So that moral faith bore Robertson's spirit up into the heavenly places. So an entire committal of a soul even to a single moral truth will in the processes of the Spirit lift it up, and it will carry it sometimes almost as with a whirlwind into the highest realms of spiritual reality and light.

Robertson's truth, from which his life revived, and his creed grew again,—his own and not another's,—represents only one of the many possible points of contact which men may find between themselves and the moral law and spiritual verities.

I am not saying that always men will grow, or advance at once from such beginnings of real faith into a full, rich creed, or into clear Christian assurance. But my insistence is, that always we must begin with some simple thing, some near, present truth, if it be only a belief in right, or as a man's trust in his mother. We must always begin with something which we can and do believe with all our minds and hearts, or we never shall come to any high and large faith worthy a man's confessing; and further, when thus in solemn sincerity we have begun with something real to form our personal creed, experience shows that in all probability we shall be led on and on, and other, farther, diviner truths will ere long become ours. Let a man knock resolutely at any door of moral truth until it be opened to him, and he will pass into a whole realm of truths. Through whatever particular gateway or window, or over whatever wall of difficulty a man once gets fairly into the moral world, all things in the moral universe become his.

There is no truth, however lowly, which, if a man obeys it, does not have further revelations in it, and that may not lead him from grace to grace and from strength to strength.

In the old Biblical story, if Abraham had not run from his tent-door to meet the three men who stood in some mystery of their coming before him, and if he had not exercised towards them a simple and sincere hospitality, he never would have received the further revelation from the Lord, with which, as his angels, they had been sent. And there is truth for us, if we will take it, in this Biblical story of the visit of the angel of the Lord to the patriarch. If we will welcome the truth which seems to stand over against us at the door, if we will treat it as it becomes us, children by nature of some divine promise, to treat any truths that may appear before us, it will surely have some further word of the Lord for us; and we shall receive more than we may have thought when we did the simple duty of the moment, or were ready to own

and welcome the first appearances of truth to us.

In fact, it is astonishing, and greatly encouraging, to observe how near in the experiences of men the divinest truths come to the humblest duties; how often, when a man does some single true thing, it will seem to throw open a window for him out into the whole light of life. The distance is not so great as it sometimes seems between things human and divine. It is not so far along the way of the Spirit between faith in goodness and trust in God. There lies no astronomic space between conscience in man and God in heaven. A right deed lays hand of trust directly on the Eternal Righteousness. The understanding may falter, logic may travel after in its slow way; but a generous spirit leaps to the thought of love's endless, deathless life; a brave soul lives in the courage of its immortality; the highest is closest to the lowest; God exists always just beyond duty; immortality is pledged in true life and love.

I shall have to speak further and more

explicitly of these ultimate points of human history and divine revelation — these primal facts of our lives, unresolvable into anything simpler — these first and final and permanent truths of being and of revelation, which men may seize and hold with a living faith ; and I shall need also to indicate how, in touch and contact with these, we may expand, enrich, and fructify our personal creed until it shall yield us truth enough to live by and to die by.

What I have been thus far saying may possibly seem to some of you not to contain much belief, or to go very far ; but who of us does not need every now and then to begin again at the beginning ? And these words point, at least, towards the moral springs of any Christian faith which shall have in it power to keep itself pure, and to freshen life for others. I think in going back and up to these primal moral sources and first human springs of faith, we are doing that which Jesus must often have been thinking of when he put the beginning of his whole Gospel into these general and exceedingly simple words,

“repent and believe.” These are moral verbs, signifying certain initial energies and actions of men’s lives. And the first of these verbs was left both by John the Baptist and by Jesus without any specific object, for each and every man to make specific in the particulars of his own sins. To repent with a real and particular repentance, to repent of anything false, unworthy, impure, cowardly, is to go back, and at that particular point of repentance to get into direct soul-touch with all God’s moral being. A man repents of some selfish thing; by that act he again comes into contact with the eternal truth of love. A man repents of a false, mean word; at that point of his repentance he touches everlasting truth. A man repents of any lust; by that way he goes straight out towards all the moral sovereignty and holiness that there is in the universe. And naturally, as day follows night, the word *believe* follows the word *repent*. A man is left believing in something true, good, beneficent, whenever he repents of anything evil, false, unloving. So these two words which were

first in Jesus' preaching of his Gospel, must still be first in our work of laying the foundations of a creed for life. And it were better to lay now these foundations, though the workman fail before he dies to build the whole Christian house of faith upon them; it were better to build upon this rock of moral truth, repenting until one gets down to it, and believing as far as one can build upon it, than to put together a whole Christian confession, spacious and pretentious, with nothing but the sands at the foundation of it.

II.

IN PERSONAL TOUCH WITH  
CHRIST.

*He saith unto them, But who say ye that I am?  
And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the  
Christ, the Son of the living God. — MATT. xvi. 15, 16.*

## II.

### IN PERSONAL TOUCH WITH CHRIST.

IT was urged in the preceding sermon that a man must himself first take root somewhere in moral reality, if he is to grow into a fruitful faith. I wish to follow further the same method of forming a personal creed, as I shall seek for some points of personal contact with the Christian doctrines.

In our effort to gain a Christian creed for life we read the Bible, go to church, are taught the doctrines, and then very likely fall ere long into perplexity. There are many religious doctrines, and they extend over wide ranges of possible truth. The churches are not altogether agreed concerning the doctrines of Christianity, and the Bible itself leaves unanswered many questions which it raises. It might

even be said that it raises more questions than it answers. Christianity is the great interrogation of history;— Who do men say that I, the Son of man, am? Who do ye say that I am?

We need first of all to gain some real contact with the life of Christ, to come into some personal touch with the Son of man, or all his teachings will be but as words in the air to us. And if we would bring to the faith any man who has no settled Christian belief, unless we can succeed in leading him to a Christian creed in this living way, we shall only make another scribe or Pharisee of him; and the world has already enough of such, and no use for more of them.

I have taken a text from a passage of Scripture which shows how the multitude thought and talked about Christ, and also the way in which the disciples had come to know him. This difference between the people's way of apprehending Christ and the disciples' way, may help us in our present desire to find the right method for gaining a personal Christian creed. The

text contains the first distinctively Christian confession ever made by a disciple. And you notice how short it was, "And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Ah, Peter, you couldn't come to the communion-table of some of our churches with only that creed. Unless you added some further "memorandum" of belief, you would not do for a missionary to the heathen with a confession so immature as that. "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah";— who was it that said this of Peter and his short Christian creed? The Lord was ready instantly to found his Church, as upon a rock, on the man who had made that first simple confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." To the man of this simple creed the Lord gave the power of the keys in his Church. And possibly the time is near when we shall take off all other complicated locks of our modern invention, and leave only that simple latch of Peter's on the door of the Lord's house.

The interesting thing in this Scripture,

and the instructive inquiry for our present purpose, lies in this: how had Peter ever found for himself the way up to that simple yet grand confession of the Christ? You notice that Jesus brought out by his two questions the difference between the belief of the multitudes concerning him, and the faith of the disciples in him. That contrast in their apprehension of Christ corresponded to some difference in the manner of their approach towards him, or their endeavor to know him. We need not look far to discover what these divergent ways were. The multitude had been content to look occasionally at Jesus as he passed by, and to tell one another what was said of his mighty works. The disciples had *lived* with him. The people had discussed his miracles; some did not believe, and many others were willing to say, He must be a prophet, another Elijah, or a John the Baptist. The creed of the multitude did not go any farther or deeper than their experience of Christ. Not having been touched or changed in their lives by his Spirit, they could confess at best only that

he was a worker of miracles, perhaps a mighty prophet. But the disciples had learned Christ in a very different way. They had not looked up and watched him awhile as he went through the streets of Capernaum, and then hurried back to their business, buying and selling, and jiving one another. They had gone and *lived* with the Nazarene day in and day out. They found Jesus out in his every-day life. And so living with him, they could not think of him merely as an Elijah, or a John the Baptist. Living with him, and trying to bring their lives up to the level of his life, they had learned that the Son of man was not like any other Hebrew man. And when one day the Master turned, and asked, "Who say ye that I am?" Peter spoke up out of his personal knowledge of the Lord, and said, like an honest man, the one thing he could say, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." That was the way in which the first, simplest Christian creed was formed. It grew out of life with Jesus. And that vital, personal creed lies at the foundation of the

Church. Peter had lived with the Christ into his confession of him. Something real and fresh from God had come to him through the life of the Son of man. And he owned it.

Are we now to do a similar thing? Can we get a Christian creed, however simple, in the same way? Can we lay hold of Christianity, as of old Peter discovered for himself the Christ?

Some of us may say, We cannot do that. For the Lord does not go about among men now. We cannot study him at first sight in every-day life as Peter did. We have his gospels to read, not the Lord himself to see. And it is true we are in this respect at a disadvantage. We must go to the Book, while the first disciples could go with their questions to the Master himself. But there is a greater advantage on our side. Jesus' life was something entirely new, and at that time unrelated to man's whole life. Its fruits were largely in the future, when the first disciples knew him, and had to make up their minds who the Son of man was. It is now the old,

old story of the Gospel. And we have seen Jesus' life entering into the life of the world, forming history, and inspiring humanity with its Spirit. But with this living Spirit of the Christ, already become historic, and now working in humanity, we have to do as directly and immediately as ever the disciples had to do with Jesus himself. And we can go and live with that Spirit, and in it, if we will, as truly as ever Peter lived in Galilee with Jesus. This, then, is our present open way of coming to a Christian creed, of getting into some real touch with the Christianity of Christ, if we wish to do it. We can study the Christ by his Spirit in every-day life, as Peter watched him day in and day out while he was on earth. This is a perfectly feasible thing for any man who really wants to do it. He can try to live with the Spirit of Christ through a single day's business. We can make the effort to live according to the Spirit of Christ for one whole week, and learn then to what thoughts, conclusions, and desires a week's life, as near as we can approach

to the level of Christ's life, may have brought us. On the other hand, we might spend the week, like many of the people who first heard of him, discussing the strange doctrines, and wondering at the miracles; and in that way our creed at best would make Christ only as another Elijah to us,—some mighty prophet, of whom at heart we may be afraid.

The first real thing, I am saying, for us to do, if we would gain a personal Christian creed, is to do what Peter and the other disciples did,—go and live awhile with Jesus Christ.

Let us see if we cannot make this stand out more clearly by considering the matter in some particulars of it. For this purpose let us open the gospels, and find two or three points by which it may be possible for any of us to lay hold of the Christian doctrines by the near ends of them, to grasp for ourselves with some moral vigor the truth of Christ's life.

With this object in mind, we read the gospels, and find the following as one pos-

sible point of attachment of our life to the life of Christ.

John describes Jesus as full of truth. Spotless truthfulness was the daily glory of this Man from God. Truth seemed absolutely to dwell in him. Jesus describes himself as one who told the truth. "Every one that is of the truth," he said to Pilate, "heareth my voice." Then let us begin at this virtue of truthfulness to be followers of Christ, seeking to live with him in his truthfulness. Let a man determine to get some real grasp of Christianity at this positive point of truthfulness. Suppose one tries to live one day, one whole week, with absolute sincerity; to live like Christ, as a man whose whole being and conversation is of the truth. What a new beginning of a Christian creed for life that might be even to some of us church-members and ministers! To rid one's life of all make-believe; to see facts in their straight lines, and to speak squarely what one sees to be true; to be truthful in one's secret thought, not coddling one's own soul; to be full of truth

in all one's relations with people and in business, — that would be a very plain way, and a near, possible way also, for one to begin to follow Christ ; that is, to begin to be a Christian man, with a real Christian creed of life.

This may seem too simple a way of beginning to form a Christian creed. But try it ! Try it for a week or a month, and see what may come of it. Seek to give up with a ruthless determination all make-believe, and to live with Christ in absolute genuineness of character, and learn what the divine reward of such manner of life may be. For in proportion as any of us succeed in living thus with the Christ in perfect sincerity of being, it is true we may find some crosses to bear, and make enemies, as the Lord did ; but we shall also find life growing fuller and richer with a divine presence and an immortal hope ; and to the true man, truths of God will come with noble greetings from all the ways of God's creation before him. True-hearted men, men themselves genuine as their Lord, do not, as a rule, find

the universe to be hollow-hearted ; but at the focus and centre of all moral reality they know the living God.

I pass to another point of entrance for us into life with Christ, and consequently also into the disciple's knowledge in such life. This time let one of the beatitudes attract us. It opens before us a most excellent way into a Christian faith: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Only let us not fail to take the first necessary steps up through this beatitude into the kingdom. It is not, Blessed are they who say Lord, Lord ! There is nothing in all ethical teaching more radical than this same sweet beatitude. It requires thorough work of any man who would receive it. Suppose we try for a day or week to form a creed of Christian life for ourselves in the manner marked by this blessing. One of the first things we shall have to do will be to heap up all our pride and pretence, and then to kindle in our souls a hot fire of wrath, and to burn up those shams and delusions which we love. Throw it all in — our pride of ancestry, of position,

of attainment, of money, of talent, of social position — every branch and fruit of our pretence; burn it all up: and then over the ashes of our pride we must pray for a new heart simple enough, and sincere like Christ's, to own a brother in the humblest man we meet, and to receive a word of the Lord in the least duty which any moment may bring to us from the will of the Father. Become poor in spirit — my soul but another human emptiness to be filled, may be, from some divine fulness! My life but as the lowly banks through which some renewing grace may flow like a stream!

“Blessed are the poor in spirit”; so the Master says: yes, Lord, but we have books, and knowledge, and power; and we love to be greeted in the market-places; and our synagogue is ancient; and our fathers sat in the uppermost seats. But if any man of us wants to be a Christian man, and to win for himself a real Christian creed, he can do no better than by taking this single beatitude and letting it for a week to come, from one Sabbath-day to the

next, be the whole Bible for him, be all the Christian doctrine for his lesson — simply this one thing and nothing more; and then, if he will thoroughly learn this truth, if this much has entered as a living word of the Lord into his soul, he may be prepared for some higher lesson of Christian doctrine; he may be ready to go farther into the heart of Christianity. Through the difficult gate of this high beatitude he may discover that he has entered into a broader, sunnier kingdom, having more of heaven in it than he had dreamed of before.

The Christianity of Christ presents itself to us men at a great many points by means of which we may gain some personal access to it, if we wish to do so; and different men may apprehend the truth as it is in Jesus by different contacts of their lives with it; but we all need to find entrance into the doctrines of Christ in some such living way, if our confession of them shall not prove a condemnation rather than our salvation. For the men who will have the scantiest chance for justification at the

Lord Christ's bar after death, — shall they not be those of us who have the longest creeds and the shortest practice?

Let me speak now of but one more of these real ends of Christian doctrine which are well within our reach. In the same Sermon on the Mount are these words of Christ: "Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away." Ah! but that won't do! That is too much; that is not scientific ethics. I am not to give to every beggar; and lending without good security were folly. Very well; I do not think the Master would care to dispute any of these common propositions of prudence with us; the Gospel is not a professor's lecture: but I hear Jesus repeating his word, "Give, and turn not away"; and I see him looking straight in the face of any man of us, richer or poorer, scientific or unlearned, and saying, "Take that as you know I mean it; no subterfuges, no evasions; no excuses with which you only half deceive yourselves and do not blind me, — I, the Son of man, who knows what is in man."

We may see the Master, if we want to see him, marking for us right here one plain place where we may enter into his life, and begin to have a real Christian creed. And yet how we love to pass by on the other side of this particular open way into the Christian faith. We go by this gate, saying, "I find great difficulty with some of the doctrines, such as the Trinity, atonement, and future punishment; I don't know about these." Very well; just now, in this present earthly stage of our education for eternal life, it is much more important that we should understand Christ at the moral beginnings of the Gospel of his Spirit; and here is one of those beginnings.

A commandment is put before us clearly and severely as a piece of sharp steel, the point of it not to be evaded, in this single gleaming verse of Jesus' sermon. The Lord did not care to stop to add the qualifications, or to explain the conditions under which that precept is to be practised. Probably the Lord knew us men well enough to leave us to add the qualifica-

tions, or to make any necessary rebates on his commandments. He was intent on putting his truth so that we men may have no excuse for not seeing it and doing it.

In this verse, then, as any one may see, the Lord lifts up absolute generosity of soul at one gateway into his kingdom. This is one living way of entrance into a Christian creed, and few there be who go in thereat. Though we may long have professed his name, though we may have come at some other places in our experience of life into sympathy with the Master, it would be profitable for any of us to go back, to begin over again, and to try this way of knowing Christ Jesus, — “Give to him that asketh, . . . turn not away.” Suppose we seek to gain a real Christian creed in that manner for a week of honest discipleship. Suppose that from this Sunday to next Sunday we try to live in the spirit of that word which Christ himself followed when he lived among men ; suppose that a man resolves, However busy I may be, however bothered with many calls upon me, I will endeavor to be a Christian man in this one

particular ; I will try this Christian experiment for one week ; I will turn no one away for whom I have power to do anything ; at least, if I cannot give him what he asks, I will not let him go without feeling that I have done what I could for him ; I will be a Christian man in this one practical point of human sympathy with the Master's life ! What would follow, if any number of us should make this single Scripture our whole Bible for a season, though we should lay for awhile all the other doctrines on the shelf ? One thing surely would happen : we should see on Sunday in our churches some men who may not have gone to church for years, some who might come wondering what new thing had been brought to pass in the religious world. And another and very happy thing might happen to any of us who should once succeed in getting at this point this real hold of Christianity,—we should go to church, and whatever the sermon, or whoever the preacher, we should find more divine truth coming home to us, and remaining in our thoughts to light up our

lives for us, than we had often seen before. Get close to any word of Christ, and you will see a great light! Stand off, and no wonder the light grows dim in the fogs.

And, my friends, whatever we may preach, or say we believe, we do not understand the first principles of the divine atonement, we do not come within astronomic distance of the kingdom of heaven, until through some such human sympathy, or deed of truth, we let ourselves into the life of Christ. And all our religious pulse-feelings, and careful account of our various religious symptoms, and comfortable nursing of our religious notions, and occasional hot-water bags for warming the old religious numbness, and pampering our religious appetite on the latest theological luxuries, and careful dressing up of our souls for religious consolations,—all these are but signs of a sick man's weakness, and do not witness to the living Master's creed. God be praised, the Church of Christ is to abandon with a mighty repentance this whole sickliness of its confession, and it is beginning to show to the people

a creed truer to the divine life of the Lord among men. Some of us have had visions and dreams of our church entering through this great door and effectual into the new apostolic confession which some day the whole Church is to make of the Son of man who is the Son of the living God. I read an article of that simple, vital creed from the book of life only the other day ; I wrong no privacy by nameless mention of it. This was the Christian truth I read afresh from life : I had been sent for to give Christian burial to a woman whose relatives had been unknown,—a forlorn, friendless soul. Those living near by had thought her peculiar, not knowing what wrong, suffered years before, had warped her being ; and that woman this church, by some of its members, privately and quietly had taken to one of its homes that she might find a Christian place in which to lie down and die. It was a simple Christian thing to do ; yet I who, not knowing the circumstances, had been disturbed by a call of pastoral duty towards a stranger which interrupted this sermon-

writing, came back with that Christian thing which some one had done, weaving itself into my thought of the Christian creed; and I found it easier to look with a believer's eye at the sciences which were assembled in my bookshelves, and to say in my heart, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," — because I had come from a human home where a word of the Master had been done to one of the least in his name: "I was sick, and ye visited me; I was a stranger, and ye took me in." And that one Christian thing which had been done, brought to me again and more distinctly the vision and the dream which many now are seeing of the church of the future. The days, I thought, are at hand, perhaps nearer than we think, when we shall find Christ's doctrine everywhere as the bread and the wine of the life of the people. Such works of faith shall not be left here and there to be wrought by private hands of charity, but the church will give in every way the Lord's life to the people. And at the heart of all great communities, at every

centre of our crowding, anxious life, some church will stand, not to preach the Lord's truth only, or to call men to prayer; but it shall stand, in the name of the Son of man, fully organized and equipped, and ready to do any service that men may give to men who need.

The ministering church will have on its staff not the preacher only, or the religious teacher, but others who may have been called and chosen to the works of the Christ for the people. Among the poor and the sick, the clergyman of the church will not be called to pray where the trained nurse of the church is not also sent to minister. The church will represent its Master and Lord by a whole choice apostolate of helpers among the people. And in such full and complete ministry the bequests of the dead will work with the services of the living for the witness to the real Christian creed, until the Lord shall come.

If we begin thus our Christian creeds, in such real manner as I have had in mind, at almost any point where we may find the truths of Christ to be done by us, they can

be trusted to bring in time their own evidences to us, and they will yield light also for the reason's use and guidance in the study of the doctrines. Peter living with Christ finds the Messiah. The disciples walking with Jesus become the Christian apostles.

But without going further now, this sermon sums itself up in these two points, and with this outlook from them. You may never gain any true understanding of the Son of man, whatever you may think about the Christ, if you are content to seek him as those scribes did who stood around in Jerusalem discussing his miracles, or those people who ran after him from Capernaum to get some loaf or fish from his gift. For the man who takes up the Bible for the sake of discussion will find a stone ; and the other man who goes to church to get a piece of the social loaf from it, usually finds the bread which he seizes, turning sour in his mouth. There are ways in which we surely cannot learn who the Son of man is. But any one of us may know the Christ, even as Peter came

to his confession of him, if we will seek, in some real particulars, at least, to live with Christ in his Spirit, day in and day out. And this is the outlook for him who willeth to do the will of God ; he shall know of the doctrine. Following where the Spirit of Christ leads, his life, too, shall come sooner or later to its Cæsarea Philippi, and one whom he has learned to know in the Divine Spirit of His life will stand radiant before his soul, and say, “Blessed art thou : for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.”



III.

NEARER ENDS OF HEAVENLY  
TRUTHS.

*If I told you earthly things, and ye believe not,  
how shall ye believe, if I tell you heavenly things ?—*  
JOHN iii. 12.

### III.

#### NEARER ENDS OF HEAVENLY TRUTHS.

I HAVE taken this text because it shows further Jesus' method of teaching intelligent men. The text contains a principle of faith for use in our effort to enlarge and expand our personal creeds. According to this word of Jesus if a man has faith in those parts of his teaching which come within the range of our earthly experience, he may then be prepared to believe in those portions of Jesus' doctrine which he taught from his higher, heavenly experience. We are to lay hold of divine truth by those near ends of the doctrine which are let down into our earthly life, and then we may hope to gain faith in the more heavenly truths.

The text indicates plainly this principle

of progress in a man's possible faith in the Christian doctrines. Jesus, you remember, was talking with a master in Israel who had already learned, or might be presumed to know, certain religious truths from his education and experience as a Hebrew man. Jesus began his conversation by referring to those first principles of spiritual life and knowledge with which Nicodemus might already have been somewhat familiar. Jesus impressed upon Nicodemus the truth that spiritual vision belongs only to the spiritual man.

“ Except a man be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Unless a man is born not of flesh and blood merely, but born of the Spirit, he can expect to have no sense or vision of the kingdom of God. To see spiritual things, one must first have a spiritual eye. To know the heavenly things, one must gain some heart for heaven. Seeing the kingdom depends upon some inward power to see what is lying without and above us, and is to be seen of God's kingdom. This truth is a near end of the Master's teaching which

a sincere Israelite should have been quick to apprehend. That law of vision of the kingdom had been a principle of all prophetic experience in Israel. Of course it was easy for a doctor of Jewish divinity to whip his mind into a foam and confusion over that truth of the kingdom, if he was not ready to receive it simply and with deep, quiet trustfulness. Jesus had assumed this law of the dependence of spiritual vision upon spiritual birth as an evident truth, which a Master of the Hebrew law and prophets ought to accept at once on so clear a statement of it as he had just made. A man cannot see the kingdom of God unless he has been born anew, born of the Spirit of it. But Nicodemus, led perhaps through some Rabbincal habit of mind to reason subtly where he might have simply trusted and assented, met this truth of religious experience by raising that old question which the finite mind can ask of any fact of life, How? "How can a man be born when he is old?" Jesus replied by stating the same elementary truth of spiritual life and knowledge

still more explicitly, and then by a simple analogy indicating that men are not able to answer that question, How can it be? even in regard to familiar phenomena of nature. But facts are facts, whatever may be the final explanation of them; so this truth that spiritual vision accompanies spiritual manhood and depends upon it, is a fact of our present or earthly experience. "So is every one that is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus repeated his question, though less confidently and more reverently, the second time. Jesus appeals again to Nicodemus's presumed experience as a master in Israel, and asserts in the next verse his own higher knowledge. Then the Lord declares this law of faith which is contained in our text: if one will not believe when he may lay hold of the near, earthly ends of religious doctrine, how can he expect to advance to faith in the higher, heavenly truths of the divine teaching? If Nicodemus fails to grasp that truth of the spiritual birth which is a first fact of all quickened religious life, how can he understand Jesus when he

proceeds in the closing part of his conversation to speak of those heavenly things of God's love and his atonement? If any man of us will not seize the Christian doctrine by some portion of it, which lies within our possible earthly experience, how can he expect to rise to the apprehension of the heavenly parts of the teachings of the Christ?

Or, to take the law of the progressive formation of a Christian creed out of the negative form in which it lies before us in our text, and to put it in its positive principle, it runs as follows: from faith in the more earthly portions of the Christian doctrines one may expect to gain further beliefs in the more heavenly truths of revelation. Grasp with a firm faith those religious truths which are let down within your reach, and let them swing you up to higher knowledge. But do not let us pretend to have been wafted up into the top boughs of the tree of Christian knowledge, if we have not cared to lay hold of the branches within our reach close to the ground, and to climb up by them. We may read our

Lord's text both ways: if you will not lay hold of the earthly parts of my doctrine, the heavenly things of it are not for your eyes; and, conversely, you do not really see the heavenly things, if you have not moral eyes for the practice of the earthly things.

The man, for instance, who is so morally near-sighted that he does not perceive that it is better to be brave than a coward, better to be generous than selfish—what is his religious eyesight worth when he pretends to see the far, high, heavenly truths? These two parts of the Lord Christ's doctrine go together, the earthly and the heavenly. It is true, a man may have some real perception of the lower part of the doctrine, or of those religious truths which enter directly into his present experience, and still his eyes may be holden waiting the higher revelations; but certainly if a man disregards the earthly side of divine truth which he should know, although he would have us subscribe to some theological map of the heavens, of which he may have taken the agency in the

churches, he but deceives himself, and the truth is not in him.

To all of us who are willing to receive this law of advance in the Christian beliefs, as Jesus wished Nicodemus to take it, it will prove a very helpful principle of progress in the upbuilding and enlargement of our personal creeds. First get firm hold of some truths and powers of the Spirit in their earthly effects and present meanings: then you may stand ready to receive higher knowledge of divinity. This, I am insisting, is the vital method of gaining a real theology. How this method works; how from the beginnings of some real belief in the nearer, earthly parts of the Christian doctrine we can gain further and longer Christian creeds,—may be better brought out, if we seek to apply this method of learning the doctrines to two or three of the chief teachings of Jesus and the apostles,—such as the Christian doctrine of God, the divine forgiveness of the sin of the world, and the future life.

Before I attempt, however, to approach in the way just indicated these particular

articles of our Christian faith, several general observations concerning this real and vital way of doctrinal study should be made.

I want to have you all see that this is the reasonable way of learning what we can of the doctrines of Christ. It is the honest endeavor on our part to enter first into the spirit of Christianity in order that we may understand truly and more fully the teachings of Christ. And that, I say, is thoroughly reasonable; indeed, it is the only reasonable way of understanding the doctrine of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are applying thus to the study of the Christian doctrines a first principle of intellectual criticism. One must put himself into the spirit of a poem, or a piece of music, or of a Gothic cathedral, if he would catch its deeper meanings, or understand its soul of melody, or if he would have any true appreciation of the "minster's vast repose." Shall a man dare to require less of himself in his approach to the Christianity of Christ? Unless he enters humbly, even as a little child, into

the Spirit of the divine Teacher, he is not fit to discuss the Christian doctrines. Yet a man will talk glibly and fluently of the most exalted doctrines, or declaim against the Christian beliefs, when not for one honest, earnest day of pure, noble living with Jesus of Nazareth, has he sought to enter into the spirit of Christianity, and to learn the divine secret of that one gloriously sacrificial life. If a person should write a philosophy of music, and dispute with musicians over the laws of harmony, who had never heard a sweet song singing itself in his own heart, he would justly be treated with contempt. The music must get into the man before the man can be a critic of the music. If a book-scholar should draw a series of architectural designs, and write a whole creed of architecture, who had himself never followed with delighted eye a line of beauty, or felt the dignity of pure and noble form, he and his work would be unnoticed by all art-loving Greek souls, or minds of Gothic aspiration. Should we entertain more regard for bodies of divinity which are not

throughout the expression of the Spirit of Christianity? Should a confession be honored as a true symbol of faith unless it betrays in every chapter, article, and line of it, the spirit of the Gospel,—the Spirit of Christ? A creed that does not have the music of the Gospel in it is no creed for us publicans and sinners. Let us hear the song of the faith singing itself through your life, and then we will listen to your teaching of the doctrines.

For instance, if I reach a belief in the existence of God as the conclusion of some argument, my belief will be a rational affirmation, but it may remain only the abstract summary of a course of high thinking; a God so reached may remain only the necessary inference of my logic, but not be Him in whom I live, and move, and have my being. A God who exists for me only at the end of an argument, is not an immediate and felt presence in my soul. In this sense it is true that a proved God were no God. But if I lay hold by faith of the being of God through some special experience which

has brought me to a realization of the intervention of some higher Power in my life, then my faith in God gains reality at the source of it, and is no more an intellectual explanation only of the mystery of the universe, but becomes an actual fact and energy of my personal life. I may recall some particular experience, or combination of events, which seemed to me providential. I cannot explain satisfactorily to myself how those different events were put together, how they were timed for me so signally, unless a higher Intelligence, thinking of me, had something to do with their arrangement, unless the finger of God set the hands together at the right time on my clock. The events themselves may have been quite in the natural order of things ; mechanism may account for the wheels of the clock, and the hands ; but the *timing* of those events, the setting the hands to the true moment, implies in my life some higher thought and care. So much then my life may have taught me of God's providence. That belief will be real to me as my life from

which it has come. Then let my further thought of God start from such divine actuality in my experience, and build itself up on that. Let other real experiences of my soul enter into it. Thus my theology, however imperfect it may be in form, will have from the beginning of it some vital substance of faith in it.

And what we need now even more than sound theology is real theology. The church needs a real theology for its working-creed. Better one ounce of real theology than a whole pound of verbal theology. We hear the phrase often used in these days, "new theology"; but to win for ourselves and our age a real theology is the present effort, the one aim, the thoughtful prayer of many Christian teachers. The name "new theology" is given to this vital movement by others; no student with a historical conscience would choose that designation for his own thought. A theology may be new or old; but the one important thing is this, Is it real theology to us now? If our old theology should become to us only a repetition of our

fathers' creeds, or but a sacred memory of a mother's beliefs,—hallowed and dear as such memory may be,—if our theology should represent only "some Bethel where God has been," it would be for us the worst theology we could have; for a personal creed which has not become a living truth within us, and which should fail to answer to our honest thought, would be worse than a mockery; we should be bound to it as to a body of death from which the Spirit of life would set us free. A church that could retain a confession of faith which has ceased to be real in its pulpits, would lie not to men only, but to the Holy Ghost. So, likewise, any new theology might be equally worthless and hurtful, if it were only a substitution of some new phrase for some older form of words, and if it should not bear witness to some fresh access of spiritual life. What all Christian churches need to do, is very humbly and honestly to get down to the real in their faiths, the real in the Scriptures, the real in Christian experience, the simple, final, divine reality in the life of the Christ.

And in much that may seem on the surface to be destructive or perilous to our beliefs, we may find, if we look deeper, the signs of a spiritual return to real faith. When have so many men in our churches, so many preachers and religious teachers all over the world, seemed more desirous to see and to do the real Christian thing?

One other general remark should not be left unspoken. Our text shows that there may be differences in the nature or degree of our assurance concerning different parts of the teachings of Christ. One part comes down near to us, enters into our earthly experience, may be morally or spiritually verified by us in our present life. Other portions of the Lord's teachings are heavenly, and our belief in them rests on trust in Him. The simple, essential truths come, at least at some points of them, into close contact with our earthly life. I shall proceed to show how this holds true of such articles of faith as the being of God, the divine forgiveness, and the moral retributions which stretch on into the future life. But just now my

point is, that according to Christ's own principle of faith, as contained in this text, we may expect differences in the kind and degree of our beliefs corresponding to the different portions of his teaching. And this remark is very needful, because one trouble which many find in believing arises from their misunderstanding this: they have been taught, or they seem to think, that they must take the whole creed of the church with equal faith; must believe in every article of the longest and fullest summary of Christian doctrine with the same definiteness, clearness, and precision of belief. But to require or expect men to believe everything with the same degree of faith, would be the shortest and surest way we could take to turn the Church of Christ into a synagogue, and to make Pharisees of all believers. Yet just this misunderstanding has worked unfortunately for the church; the lingering remains of it are making much mischief in our Congregationalism at the present hour. For the Christian religion is too often put before men as a system of doctrine, each

separate part of which is necessary to the whole, and doubt as to the least portion of which imperils everything. Men are led to suppose that they must believe a whole table of doctrines with equal positiveness, and be as sure, for instance, of some dogma concerning the future life as they may be sure of the existence of God.

If the whole series of articles which men have deduced from Biblical proof-texts were put before us in this determined way, as though we could be equally sure of all and must believe the whole, or have no part in the faith of the church, then we should be perfectly justified in telling such confident teachers of religion to wait until the judgment-day for our answer to their conditions of Christian fellowship. If we were not permitted to enter through the church-door as little children into the kingdom of heaven, then we could at least refuse to go in with the scribes to the synagogue, and we might choose rather to stay outside with the publicans and sinners until our Lord may find us and speak some simple word of

his grace which we may understand, and which will be gospel enough for us in our present struggle for some higher mastery of life.

In this present stage of our divine education for eternal life we ought not, indeed, to expect to see all Christ's teachings with equal distinctness. He said some things which his first disciples did not understand. Some believers have more clear ideas on many doctrines than it is well for them to have. Clear ideas with regard to some dim and distant portions of religious truth are very possibly false ideas. We would like indeed to have definite religious beliefs at every point of doctrine. How many heavenly things we would like to know as certainly as we know some earthly things ! But evidently the Bible is not a nautical almanac by which on any sea we can make precise calculations of the heavens. Certainly the Bible is not a definition of God, or a complete map of his decrees, or a perfect system of block signals and interlocking switches all along the way of salvation.

The Bible is not equally clear, definite, authoritative, concerning all the doctrines. The Bible is like nature, having in it depth, distance, and perspective. And faith cannot go up and down through the Bible like a civil engineer with compass and measuring-tape, to return with the exact dimensions of all truths; but faith must go often to the Bible, as the poet goes to nature, to see what is revealed, to gain new views of old landscapes, to partake of the life which flows through all, to come back from every fresh communion with the spirit of it more loving, trusting, and worshipful. It is well to see as much truth clearly as we possibly can; but with regard to some whole ranges of far, heavenly truths, too definite assertions may betray the pride of the reasoner rather than the humility of an observer; and too certain beliefs carried in confident controversy beyond the distinctness of revelation may become stumbling-blocks and causes of division among disciples who ought to be glad to be sent forth in the one Name to do the Lord's good works in many lands

by the one Spirit. Some of us, it is true, may be too content to remain in a condition of moral and religious nebulousness where we ought to have clear-cut Christian decisions; we want especially to see young lives crystallizing into clear, firm, Christian character. But some of us also may be losing vitality and power of trust from labored and foolish endeavors to keep toiling on along the Christian way under a burden of over-beliefs. We might have more faith, if our beliefs could be simplified. We need not so strain our eyes to make sure of so many things. It is enough to be as a disciple. God does not require human faith to turn itself into a telescope for the search of his heavens, but he does ask faith to see the human duties and their heavenly signs which He is always showing right before us.

We ought to be Christian mystics in some things. You go out from this church and look down the street under the elms; some things you can see clearly, so plainly that you can walk easily along your way homewards. But you look way

up the street, and you may see that some things are there, although you cannot tell exactly what they are. You fail to distinguish the people, the moving forms, in the distance; and, far off, the housetops and the trees begin to run together. I ought not to try to do in my theology what I cannot do in walking a street, or in passing across a single broad field — make everything equally definite and clear. Pilgrims like us, going home along some way of God, may perceive plainly enough the nearest truths which we need to know, that we may walk uprightly and along the homeward way; but God has set his horizons for our faith. We may know that some heavenly things are, and we are drawing nearer them, although we cannot yet tell surely what they are. We may have spiritual perception enough to warrant us in believing in more divine realities than we can define in our theologies. Mysticism is the true mood, and clear ideas may be false perceptions, where earth's far mountain-tops are lost in heaven's purpling haze. Dogmatism, too far beyond

present practical Christianity, may be anything but fidelity to God's Word. The Bible is not a handy camera with one fixed universal focus, by means of which a believer may take a tolerable snap judgment of every subject, and falsify perspective, and lose the mellow distant view.

I leave these more general remarks especially for the consideration of those who have already some Christian faith, and who would like to gain more, but who have hesitated over our systems of belief, or perhaps been kept by doctrinal difficulties from confessing Christ and sitting with his church at the Lord's table. Such remarks I know may very easily be misunderstood or perverted. But, nevertheless, if thoughtful and sincere men are to be made at home in the Lord's church, some things of this nature need to get themselves said in all our churches. For there is now a good deal of unformulated and even unbaptized Christianity in the thought and life of men outside of the church. Christ is becoming more real in many ways to this generation. His doc-

trine, although perhaps not so fully apprehended as it might be, is entering effectively into much of the best striving and working of men who are standing aloof from the churches. And within the church itself there is beginning to make itself felt and efficacious a revival of simpler and more real Christian life. At first our creeds may seem to be put in jeopardy by this new work of the Holy Ghost without and within the church. But it is truer to say that all our beliefs are going to be purged rather, and more thoroughly Christianized. Meanwhile, and in the midst of these processes of the purging of the faith of all branches of God's church, believers need persistently to go down and find again the real vital things in their personal creeds, and to live fearlessly from these with their Lord. "The apostles," we read, "were with him." That is the way in which they became apostles; they had been chosen to live with him. So the teachers and leaders of men in the new, coming Christian age will be those who more than others live with the Master, in the Spirit of the Lord.

IV.

GOD IN OUR LIVES.

*Before our God and Father.* — 1 THESS. i. 3.

## IV.

### GOD IN OUR LIVES.

IT is a great gain when God becomes real to a man. That may be the immediate gain which death shall bring to us; and he who through the mystery of this mortal life has been seeking for the living God will find it worth the pains and darkness of death to discover God as the One luminous and sweet Reality, fairer than any dawn, filling his vision at his awakening. And it were worth all effort and any cost to gain here before we die a real sense of God. For to men in general God, although believed in, is not real. To take the name of the Almighty on one's lips, to think of God as the great First Cause which the creation *once* had, to believe in the Divine Being as the necessary ground and sufficient reason of existence,—this is rational, this it is reasonable for us to do.

But this is not for us to walk before God in all our ways. He is profoundly religious, the essence of all faith is in that man, who from some experience of his life has learned to say, like the Psalmist of old, “O Lord, Thou art my God.” The Almighty is not a real Being to us unless faith, by the use of the personal pronoun, has brought God home to the human heart,—perhaps by some stress of experience has been compelled to bring God, who is in the heavens, down into the little circle of our longing life. To the disciples who had seen Jesus, life was evermore before “our God and Father.”

In forming our personal creed, or working-theory for life, we must seek above all to gain, if possible, a real God for our daily life. Is God real to me? How can I put my life out upon some full, divine Reality?

Having in previous sermons spoken of some possible points for the real beginnings of a personal creed, and having suggested also that a living faith will grow upwards from those truths which are embedded in our present experience; or that

belief in the earthly portions of Jesus' doctrine is the condition of advance to faith in the more heavenly portions of his teaching; I am brought now to the point where this method of faith may be tested and put to definite use in its application to our belief in God. We are to seek to know the being and nature of God, not by ascending up into the heavens, to bring God down to us from beyond the stars, but rather by finding what we may of God here on this little earth, and in the happenings of our own insignificant lives.

In no other way can God become a real God to us. For even if you prove to my satisfaction that once a God made this world, that proof of the existence ages ago of a Creator would not make God now present to me, "my God." I have every reason to believe that years ago somebody built the house in which I dwell. But what is that somebody to me? I may be thankful indeed if he built well; I may wonder why he built in all respects as he did: but the maker and builder of my house is not a living presence in the house,

The worth of the home is always in the living presence which informs and irradiates it. The real God is the living presence in the world. It is some felt presence of the Father that our souls seek after, not the signs that once some Creator was. If we men are to have a real God, we must find Him somewhere touching us ; He is not our God, He were only the end of our philosophy, or the assumption of our reason, or the dogma of our intellect, if we may not feel the touch of his Spirit on our spirit, if He is not the one permanent reality of experience to us. Though by some marvellous sign in the heavens the name of the Lord should be flung out across the depths of the sky ; should the nebula of Orion take miraculous form and its star-dust be fashioned into letters of light, so that, looking up, earth might read in the heavens this Scripture, “Know ye that the Lord, he is God” : even such wonder of revelation above would not make God real to us ; for men might gaze, and read, and turn again to their own devices, and serve their idols of the market-place and the school.

We want God in all our thoughts — the living God, felt at our heart-beatings, and not a God far off in the heavens.

If we had to go forth and hunt for signs of the true God ; if we were obliged first to prove that a God must exist, and then to believe in our proof of God ; we might indeed despair of our effort by searching to know him. I cannot find a God who has not first found me. We could not prove the existence of God, did He not first show himself to us. Atheism starts out to discover the end of creation's ways, and soon stops at a dead wall ; unbelief is the enforced pause of reason before an insurmountable wall. Unless God himself opens some door and comes to man, we cannot go beyond the world to Him. If we can find, however, some points in our human life where God exists in touch with us, then faith may succeed in taking the offered hand of God. If the hand of God has been stretched out towards me in my life, then my reason may go out towards Him, and my faith reach up and lay hold of the arm of the Almighty.

Our first question of religious faith narrows itself accordingly to this: Has anything diviner than myself ever touched me? Has something Godlike at any point taken hold of human life? In other words, are there any places or portions of our earthly experience which indicate divine contacts with us? If so, by those parts of our human history, through these passages of my life, I may know my God.

But to put the question in this way is to answer it, at least so far as common human experience seems to be not entirely insulated from contact with some higher Power. This earth is bound by lines of electric influence to supernal Forces. Human life indicates points of spiritual contact. The points of light in history — the illuminations of the high, prophetic souls — are the points at which the transcendent influences pervading human life break into visibility. Indeed, so conscious are we of our human dependence upon something which is not human, that it ceases to be with men practically a question between atheism and some religion. The main con-

cern of man is not, Have I a God? but, Who, or what, is the God who holds me in his power? What is he like? Something superhuman has us in its grasp; it seems sometimes to hold us as in a vise. We cannot escape the higher law. We must. That one word *must*—so hard often, so constant a pressure of necessity from the seen and the unseen powers upon us—is itself evidence of some Sovereignty on which we are dependent—some supernal Power which seizes our wills, and rises strong as fate, and firm as the everlasting rock, against any resistance of our desires of life. We must. Some Omnipotence has laid hold of us. So much of the pressure of the supreme Power upon us we may find in common experience. You feel it in your business. There is an incalculable element in business. Something from the Unknown enters into the making of every fortune. Alert men, indeed, seize opportunity; wise men may calculate the tide to be taken at its flood; but there is an unearthly power in the flowing of the tides. Amid the known forces of history moves

the incalculable and unmeasurable Power. “A certain I know not what,” the Emperor Frederick the Great said, sports with human projects. “I sincerely believe,” wrote Sir Fowell Buxton to his daughter, concerning a division which took place in the House of Commons during the conflict for West Indian emancipation, “I sincerely believe that *prayer* was the cause of *that division*; and I am confirmed in this, by knowing that we by no means calculated on the effect. The course we took appeared to be right, and we *followed it blindly*.”

This truth of the existence of some One higher Power lies at the beginning and the end of all our science, although no science can disclose further its secret. Only a few years ago our physical science was quite content to count the elements as so many ultimates of nature; but now these elements, between sixty and seventy of them, begin to disclose mutual relations, and to arrange themselves as in a series, and our science presses the question still further, What is their one law, or last common

form? But no chemist has found that: it were coming perhaps too near the being of the living God for us to weigh or to determine the last element of the elements, the final unity of things. And if we could perceive the entities which are the assumptions of our physical science; if we could apprehend directly the One universal Entity into which our science would resolve ultimately all the elements of nature; we might in this way of approach towards the Creator, through the creation, come nearer than ever the metaphysicians have to the desire of the saints in the vision of God.

It is not, then, so much the fact of the existence of a God which thoughtful men will call in question;—“the period of doubt,” said Goethe, “is past; men now doubt as little the existence of God as their own;”—but the focal, burning religious question is, and always has been, What is God? Who is He, that I may worship Him? Show us what God is like.

There are four points in our present earthly experience by which God lays hold of us, and by which, therefore, we may lay

hold on God. There are, at least, these four God-given and God-lighted facts of human life and history. They are, the thinking, willing mind; the conscience of man; the love of the human heart; and the Christ in history. At these points of our earthly knowledge we may seek to apprehend our God. To attempt to draw out fully from these God-lighted facts of life their full truth of divinity, would require a volume rather than a sermon: my present object is simpler; I would seek to indicate merely, and to illustrate this way of living contact with our God. At such points as these God exists in touch with us, and we may apprehend him.

First, suppose that you sit down and think a while. Think hard; think with all your might. No matter what the subject of your thought may be — a problem of astronomy, an object on earth, a question of business; — let the subject of which you think be what it may; — but think; think intently; think with your will in your thought, holding you to it, not letting you go from it; think until you cease to

hear the ticking of the clock, or to take note of the things around you ; think until the hour passes unheeded and unmeasured as though you yourself were a timeless thought, no more bound in space or to time, but free as your thought, here, there, across the seas, at will in what was, or is to be, searching the depths, or in the heavenly places ; think thus until lost in thought, and then stop ; come back ; be again in the body. As you compare your common consciousness with that high existence in intense, absorbing thought, what have you gained ? What but a measure for that which God is, a finite measure from your moment of timeless existence in thought for his eternal Being. Such is God always and without effort, and perfectly, the willing Thought of all things, the thinking Will in whom all things have their being.

This much at least I may apprehend of Him from my finite thought. From our human experience of mind and will we may discern in this direction what the true God is, — not blind fate, not thoughtless

force, but the Mind that thinks, and holds all things in its eternal thought.

Yet this is only one of several beginnings in our present experience of possible knowledge of the nature of God.

Conscience is another. It is not the whole truth to say we have a conscience ; more truly has it been said that conscience has us. Through conscience the higher law lays hold of us. At that point in our life where duty appears, we are apprehended by God. Let us then apprehend God at this contact of our moral experience with the Higher Power. The Supreme One cannot be conscienceless, for I have conscience. Let duty command us with a glorious power. Let the inward law control the appetites of the flesh. Let the one right thing be the only thing we can think of doing. Then in the triumph over godless temptation, in some full sense of the right achieved, let us draw near our God. Not less than this can He be. He is moral Power. No sovereignty of lawless Will holds us in its arbitrary election ; but from eternity the Power that rules is Righteous-

ness. He lays hold of me through conscience, and therefore will I lay hold also of Him through conscience. He is the living Right. God is conscience, all consciences concentrated into the One pure, burning, eternal Conscience. God is *the Conscience* of the universe. Beneath that I am living; that eye is upon me.

How shall I, a sinner, escape from his presence? How can I look into that eye of God?

Yet conscience, pure, awful,—the fire consuming sin,—is not all of the Godhead to be found in our human experience. There is another place in our life where the Divine flows in. There is another God-revealing fact of the human heart. Let a man know what it is to love. Not indeed to indulge in self-pleasing sentiment; not to say, I believe in charity, I love my brethren, while he takes advantage of any one who does business with him, or refuses to put his strength beneath those whom he ought to uphold. Not to say, I love my fellow-men, while he does not drop into the contribution box so much as

the interest which his fortune accrues while he sits listening to the Gospel. Let a man love in some genuine unselfishness ; let him make himself a real providence to somebody ; let him put his heart into something noble, and count not the cost in its service ; let him devote himself to something worthy a man's life in the world — his home, his family, his cause of right, his city, his country ; let him so love that he can snap all the small cords of self-interest, and forget his own happiness, and even could give his life rather than prove unfaithful ; and then by a man's true passion of soul, let him know the Eternal nobleness. “We love,” said a disciple, “because he first loved us.” From such experience of noblest life, it is true, no radiant robe may be woven in which the Eternal One may appear as in visible form ; — the truest things of the soul which we know best are all of them unseen, and so is our God invisible ; — but we may thus gain some vital, loving contact with God through the human heart by which we live. Conceive of him, the Adorable, as the Heart of hearts, the One

true, perfect Heart of the universe; God, who is the Mind and the Conscience, is also the great Heart of all. Gather up in your thought all affections of the family, all devotions of life, the intimate sympathies, the tenderness, the strength of human love; put all pure human hearts together, as the one collective heart of humanity; and by that true Heart of hearts know what God is. You have in that the image of his truest Being. "Yet," saith the Scripture, "God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things."

Now it were idle for any one to tell me that knowledge of the Higher Unknown Power gained in this human way is not real knowledge. What, I would like to know, is real, if love is fiction? What is true if hearts be false? If what one holds of life in his heart be not real, life's truest truth, then what he has in his eye is but film, and what his hands grasp is but shadow. There can be nothing more real than God known through love.

"I do not have to go around the world," said Goethe, "to know that the sky is

blue." We do not have to understand the full mystery of God's being around us to know what God is. A single loving human heart were enough to prove that God, from whom it came, is love.

If, therefore, we had only these near earthly ends of the truth of divinity in our experience, and must stop with these, we should have ground and reason enough for religion, and for houses of worship. Mind, conscience, love,—these three are enough to make atheism unhuman. These facts of the Divine existence within our present life are enough to lead men to hope, to look beyond earthly horizons, to lift up hands of prayer, and to await further and fuller revelations in some world to come. And having so much, we are evidently made to receive more. Irreligion means a half-filled being. Irreligion means that man is a broken thing; a creation begun and left half done. Religion means that a being made to be filled shall not be left of heaven two-thirds empty; that a life begun in the spirit is not to end in the flesh. Irreligion is a li-

bel on human nature as well as distrust of heaven. So if we had only nature's prophetic best, we should not be justified in falling back into irreligion which is man's worst. We ought to live and die expecting with Socrates, even if we could not believe with Jesus of Nazareth.

The further, and the greatest, God-revealing fact in our human history is our Lord Jesus Christ. Whatever one may think about Jesus, it is certain that God, the heavenly Father, was real to him, and that in his presence his God became real to others. God was very present to the disciples who walked with Christ. Jesus made God in his righteousness so near and real to some Pharisees and hypocrites that they could not endure it, and took counsel together to kill him. The life of Christ is a realization on our earth of what God in heaven is. God is Christlike. Against any appearances of things, or seeming difficulties even of Scripture, the disciple of Jesus may dare believe that God is most Christian, — lovable, adorable as the Christ, — the One Righteousness and

Friendliness, who is worthy of a man's utmost devotion and a woman's whole love. And it is of more essential importance for us to gain from Jesus this Christian idea of God than it is to understand how God was in Christ. The Holy Ghost seems to be teaching anew amid all our human theologies this truth of the perfect Christlikeness of our God.

So, then, in the desire to speak some words of helpfulness to those who would find God a nearer and daily reality of their lives, I have not sought to guide you along the ways of high reasoning which lead to belief in the existence of God, although it is well for those who can to pursue those well-trodden paths. Our word for to-day concerning belief in God is simply this: there are places in our common human experience which are as open windows for his light to find us; there are facts of life and history, and, above all, the great Christ-fact of history, in which God exists in touch and contact with man. As we live in these experiences, as we are ready to receive divine influence at these possible

points of its apprehension of us, we may find our God becoming real and true to us, and present every day. Christlike living yields Christlike knowledge of the Father in heaven. By his Spirit within us, the first article of religious faith, I believe in the Father, may become, as it was to Jesus of Nazareth, no vague philosophizing, but the truth of our truest being. Our friends who have gone from us into the unseen may see, upon their first awakening in that clearer life, all things before them lighted up with God. But though we wait for the perfect vision, already there are portions of our earthly experience which grow luminous with something diviner; some human experiences are aglow with the Spirit; and in the Christ was the light of God. Amid these earthly shadows there are these God-lighted facts of experience and history, the life of Jesus being the most God-revealing of all facts known to us men. The Life, John has told us, was the Light of men. As we catch in ours the reflection of that Life, we shall not be left in utter darkness. As with much repentance, true endeavor,

and genuine desire, we not only read the divine teachings, but enter into the spirit of Jesus' life, we shall know his Father and ours; the world at moments may grow tragic around our hearts, but it will never seem deserted. Our trial and discipline here will not seem aimless or useless, and death no end of existence to be dreaded, or to be accepted as a final sleep; but the older we grow, death will become to us life's increasing expectation. And prayer, likewise, will become natural as thought, sacred as duty, intimate as love, personal as the name of Christ.

V.

HUMAN FORGIVENESS A MEASURE FOR THE DIVINE.

*But that ye may know that the Son of man hath  
power on earth to forgive sins. — MATT. ix. 6.*

## V.

### HUMAN FORGIVENESS A MEASURE FOR THE DIVINE.

IN pursuance of the method for the formation of a real creed which I am seeking to follow, we approach now a distinctive doctrine of the Gospel, which has occasioned more discussion in Christian theology, and which has met more objections in the minds of men, than almost any other truth of God's Word; viz., the doctrine of the atonement. Let me remind you again of the simple and practical method by which we may seek to win for ourselves real beliefs; we should try to lay hold of divine truths by the near, earthly ends of them, and thus through those parts of the truth which are brought within our present experience of life we may hope to be put in some spiritual communication with the more heavenly portions of Jesus' teachings,

This method of beginning at the human ends of divine truths seems to me to be particularly needed in our effort to understand the atoning work of Christ. For the trouble with much of our preaching of the doctrine of the atonement lies in the unreality of it. It may fit into the necessities of some philosophy or theology, but many thoughtful men fail to gain, in their experience of life, ideas that have any actual correspondence to some scheme of salvation which they are asked to accept. And with a high sense of moral honor they prefer to go without any belief in a divine plan of salvation rather than to profess belief in some conceptions which take no actual hold on their experience of life. Some once prevalent theories of the atonement have become unsubstantial to us, simply because the ideas of government, sovereignty, and political procedures, in which such theories of the atonement had their origin, have passed away. A monarchical theory, for instance, of God's government and his method of punishing or pardoning, can have little significance to men who

have been trained under democratic institutions.

What we need is to find some points of attachment in our present life for divine truths. Is there any part of the doctrine of the divine forgiveness of sins which lies within our present personal reach, by means of which we may apprehend the higher teaching? I have chosen a text which may put us in the way of the answer we need to find. For the text is a striking illustration of the manner in which Jesus himself began to teach men his Gospel of the divine forgiveness of sins. "That ye may know," he said, "that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins." I stop with that part of the verse ; it is text enough for us now. Jesus did not say the Son of God hath power to forgive sins ; he did not say, Jehovah can impart the kingly prerogative of forgiveness ; but he put the divine forgiveness before them as a most human thing,—the Son of man is he who, in his perfect and sympathetic humanness, forgives. In that house there was an assembly of Jewish doctors of divinity, and also

there had been let down in the midst of them a disagreeably sick and paralytic man. Had Jesus for that poor man's benefit opened the book of the law, and reasoned of sin and its expiation, doubtless those learned scribes could have followed him from text to text of Moses' commandments. Had Jesus proceeded to formulate a careful statement of what might be necessary to honor the broken law, and to propitiate God's justice, in order that the sins of that palsied man, and the sins of his fathers for which he suffered, might be remitted, probably those learned doctors of the law would have understood his use of their sacrificial code and would not have thought of accusing him of blasphemy. But Jesus did no such thing. He left the future Christendom to think out such matters at its leisure, while as the Son of man he at once spoke the word of forgiveness to that helpless, trusting man. Jesus assumed the possibility of forgiveness as a well-known human experience, and proceeded at once to exercise his forgiving spirit as though there could be to him no question of its

divine right. As the Son of man he has authority to forgive sins.

So Jesus in our text takes the doctrine of God's forgiveness out of all abstractions, and puts it in its human reality and life-likeness before our faith. As the Son of man, himself sinless, and righteous, yet with a sinlessness full of sweet sympathy, and a righteousness aglow with mercy, he said, while the poor paralytic looked up into his gracious face, as though the heavens had been opened to him, "Thy sins are forgiven thee." Such is Jesus' simple, elemental teaching of his doctrine of the atonement. Human forgiveness carries in it a divine sanction. Divine forgiveness is most human. The Christ forgiving sins as the Son of man stands as representative of God, and speaks on this earth for God in heaven.

The Pharisees and scribes did not understand so simple a lesson in divinity. They never can. Their God is not human enough. Their God is but Sovereignty and Law. Before such humanness of the Christ they answered, Who can forgive sins but God

only? The scribes and Pharisees had no eyes to see the most Godlike attribute revealed in that most gracious human act of Jesus. No scheme of salvation for them to expound, was declared in the divine sweetness of that immediate word of the Son of man, *Thy sins are forgiven.*

The same truth, that our human forgiveness carries in it the authority and may be a measure of the divine forgiveness, is definitely taught in the Lord's prayer: "For give us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." So the divine forgiveness has its counterpart in the human; the lesser is of the same kind as the greater; the human is measure for the divine;— "For give us our debts, *as we forgive our debtors.*"

We learn, then, from such Scriptures how Jesus at first would teach us, and how we should be content to begin, at least, our study of the doctrine of God's forgiveness of the sin of the world. We may best enter upon the study of God's love for the world by mastering the simple elements of divinity which a forgiving spirit may learn in a reconciling ministry

among neighbors and friends. And we must gain in some actual experiences and exercises of the grace of forgiveness the materials for our belief in God's reconciliation of the world to himself, or all the Scriptures concerning Christ will remain mere words to us. The church in times past has been as orthodox as was St. Anselm's profound reasoning concerning Christ's satisfaction; and as dogmatic as was Calvin's devout logic of the divine decrees and Christ's death for the elect; and as sure of the whole counsel of redemption as has been the most conscientious scribe of our New England system of the divine government. But it will be better for the church, a thousand times better for the progress of the Lord's kingdom on earth, if through some further sacrificial and reconciling ministry among the social sins and sufferings of our world it can proceed to gain some fresh and deeper insight into the heart of God's redeeming love in Christ.

We cannot safely ignore the fact that even Christian beliefs of men may have

no more connection with their characters than the reflections of the skies are part and substance of the pool of water into which they happen to be cast. Put your cup down into that smooth pool, and you won't dip up the sky,—only water, and perhaps insipid and unhealthy water! Stir up that man of the heavenly creed, and in a moment the beliefs disappear in his temper. We want to take the heavenly truth into us, not as water may the sky, but as the tree holds the sunshine in its vital sap. The truth of the Divine Spirit which shall be converted into the souls of men will become fruitful for the salvation of the world. And what can that man really know of the doctrine of the divine forgiveness of sins, although he be as a pillar of the truth in the church, if he himself is like a piece of cold, sharp, relentless steel in his business, if he goes down the street with an eye single to his own gain, and is deaf to the cry of distress which he himself may increase by his ruthless speculation in the bread of the people? What can he know of the cost to God's

heart of our redemption, if he has no hand stretched out with all its might to save any one? Though he may have been familiar from childhood with the Scriptures concerning Christ's death, though he may even dare to press the cup of the communion of Christ's sufferings to his merciless lips, he may know less of the real and eternal truth of God's great sacrificial heart, from which the Christ comes, than that ragged Arab on the street knew, who stood for hours in rain and sleet to pick up a few pennies to save another child — his younger brother — who without his help might starve. Until we have found and followed Christ the Lord, bearing his cross somewhere upon this earth, we may not hope to know him in the heavenly places.

Having taken so large a portion of my sermon in stating thus the method of our human approach to the divine truth of the gospel of forgiveness, I must now put into small space suggestions of much that may be learned in this vital way concerning the

Christian doctrine of the divine forgiveness of the world's sin.

First. In this way sin may become known to us as a personal offence which, if one cherishes a forgiving spirit, he would like to see put out of the way forever. There are other ways in which we may learn what the sin of the world is; but when we are most profoundly convinced of a sin, we feel it as something personally wrong. We may know sin scientifically, as a hopeless blow against the iron law of things. Strike nature, and nature strikes back. Action and reaction are equal on that plane;—we reap what we sow. Moreover, as citizens under a government we know sin as crime; a law is broken, and punishment with a rough measure of justice follows as a governmental decree. Yet not always; for other elements emerge on this governmental plane, and pardon sometimes may be expedient, although punishment is just. But we know sin also, and this is the deepest knowledge we have of it, as a personal offence. A man's sin is something that wrongs some-

body. He may injure himself by it; and it is an offence against his brother. The more personally we conceive of our sins, the more we shall dislike them, and wish we were well rid of them. They are personal wrongs. They hurt others. They destroy ourselves. They cut across the vital cords. They break hearts. Sin is a personal affront. Peter denied his Lord; and the Lord looked on Peter, and Peter remembered; and he went out and wept bitterly:—such is the tragic personal history of sin, and its condemnation, and the bitter penitence which may follow it. The sin of the world is the offence of man against the person of God. It is the prodigal's wrong against the Father. Sin is worse than breaking a law; it is wrong personal, and real, as a wounded heart is real; the sin of the world, of which each and all of our particular sins are parts, is a personal offence against that adorable and lovable and perfect Being whom Jesus knew as our Father and his Father. The sin of the world not only throws us men into confused and

jarring personal relations, making our humanity like a body disordered and full of pains ; but the sin of the world, if it had might as it had will, would involve the whole order of the heavens, and break the heart of the living God. This is the personal thing, the awful thing, the damnable thing, to be forgiven.

Secondly. The forgiving spirit among men carries in itself a divine sanction. The Son of man in forgiving is true to God. Do not preach to me, does some one say, a gospel of forgiveness. Nature I know, and law I know. Nature does not lose its uniformity, and forgive. Law does not vacate its authority, and remit punishment. I must suffer for my sins. I must accept the consequences of my acts. So indeed we must. Every man of us. And while we have to do merely with nature, or law, or government, we must answer their requirements, and be dealt with according to their necessities and their limitations. But these things — nature, law, divine government — are not the last realities ; they would be but abstractions, and as nothing,

were it not for that which is the first and the last and the one permanent reality of the universe, — even God himself. The final reality of which all others are expressions or shadows, is Personality, — God's infinite personality, our personal being in his image. We are not natures having to do with natures, or laws put under laws, but we are persons living with persons, men with men, and all of us before our God and Father. Nature I know, and law I know ; but I know also forgiveness in human homes. I find forgiveness possible among men. Whatever room there may or may not be for remission of sins in nature or under good government, forgiveness is a present and gracious human possibility. The forgiving spirit is known in human life. The Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins. I behold in the midst of human history the Son of man saying with consciousness of a divine authority, “Thy sins be forgiven thee.” If man can forgive, of course God may. That Son of man in that most human act is not greater than the eternal God. “The Father,” he

said, “is greater than I.” We can well reason, therefore, from Christ’s deeds up to the Father’s works. God is the eternal and perfect Christlikeness.

The human forgiveness of the Son of man represents, therefore, God’s forgiveness in heaven. Because God is greater than our hearts, because the Father is greater even than his Christ, therefore what the Son of man forgives on earth is forgiven in heaven. Forgiveness belongs to the moral nature of man and God.

There is a doubtful Scripture which becomes clearer if we read it in this human experience of the power of forgiveness. Jesus once said to his apostles, “Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven unto them; whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.” So the Lord gave to his disciples who had his Spirit something of his power of forgiving. The Roman Church, fastening upon the letter of the Scripture, claims the right of absolution. But the right belongs to the spiritual power; the prerogative of exercising forgiveness is

given to the Christlike spirit. To receive the Holy Ghost was the condition of exercising Christ's power of forgiveness. And so far as Christian men receive the Holy Ghost, the influence of their lives shows something of that divine power of forgiveness and of judgment. The righteous, forgiving man in the community becomes a power of reconciliation or of separation; men under his touch and influence are brought to forgiveness, or are discovered for judgment. The influence and effect of such a human life, full of the Holy Ghost, remains; what it has done on earth in that Spirit is ratified in heaven, even as what the Lord did on this earth truly represented the Father, and was done in his name. Something of this solemn possibility and power resides in the most Christlike lives. God in heaven owns their judgment, confirms their influence, lets their works abide.

Thirdly. This forgiving spirit is itself many virtues in one. The man who can truly and effectually forgive, the man who can be a reconciling power in a commu-

nity, is no weak man, or man of a single virtue, or mere instance of good nature. He must also be a just man,—a man who sees what is right as clear as the day, a man who wants always to get the right thing done; a man who will not cover up evil, or hide iniquity, or say peace when there is no peace. It requires a high and even rare combination of virtues to be a peacemaker—not a peaceable soul, but a *maker* of peace; and to exercise the spirit of forgiveness in any genuine and fruitful way is no child's play at life. Try it and see. It was no common man, not a righteous Jew, nor a compliant Greek, nor a stern Roman, who could stand in that house, and say to that palsied man, “Thy sins be forgiven.” It was the Son of man, the man of men, who spoke that human-divine word of forgiveness, the man who was so human, so thoroughly and fully human, that no one to this day can trace separate ancestral influences to his person, or say of any of his features, that is Hebrew, or Greek, or Roman. He, the sinless Man, who shows us what man may be at his

highest and his best — He in his perfect humanity forgave sins. Forgiveness in God can be, therefore, no lesser virtue. It is the prerogative of no single divine attribute ; the fulness of the Godhead is in it. The divine forgiveness, like our human forgiveness, like the Christ's, proceeds from the perfectness of the Divine Being, and all the Godhead goes forth in it.

Fourthly. Human forgiveness is a costly thing. It costs something to have a forgiving spirit, and to exercise it. It is not so easy a thing for us to forgive men their trespasses. Forgiveness in a human heart always costs. And the following particulars of the cost of forgiveness may be learned in endeavors to reconcile broken human relations. First, forgiveness between men requires just judgment, or the determination to see clearly the wrong and the right. And that costs moral effort. Secondly, forgiveness requires condemnation of the wrong done, even though it be like condemning one's own flesh. And to condemn another's wrong is often a painful thing for a man or woman to do,

yet it must be done for the sake of genuine forgiveness. Such condemnation of sin, therefore, must be costly also to the heart of the true God. Thirdly, the exercise of forgiveness requires likewise an effort, however costly, to make the person who has done wrong see that wrong, and confess it. It were easier often not to forgive, to let the man who has injured one go unforgiven, than to seek for him, to show him how his wrong hurts, how deeply it has been felt. And more than one proud father or mother has not been equal to this cost of forgiveness, but has shut the door of the home, forbidden the name of the lost child ever to be spoken, or left the prodigal as one dead, rather than take the humiliating pains, rather than be at the terrible cost of seeking the lost, following the child through all sin, being ready to show at any possible moment of penitence how much it loves, how much the sin hurts it, how much is endured. Oh ! when we see in human life how much forgiveness and recovery have cost, can we wonder at the cross of the Christ ?

Nor is this all the cost of forgiveness. Still further, in genuine and lasting forgiveness nothing may be left concealed, no matter what the cost of the revelation may be. It must be known all around, by all who have the right to know, what has been done, what has been suffered, what the grief, what the penitence, what the willingness to forgive, has been and is. This, likewise, I am saying, is truth of human forgiveness. Between those concerned in it there must be the costly willingness to let everything in the wrong done and suffered come to revelation. We say familiarly one to be forgiven by a friend must make a clean breast of it; but that applies to the friend in his sense of wrong suffered, as well as to the person who asks pardon. I do not accept an apology with that genuineness which admits renewed and confident friendship, if I pretend no offence was given. I do not forgive with a forgiveness which can forget, if I still hide in my secret thoughts any unspoken sense of the wrong done. Forgiveness requires a clean breast of it on both sides; and if

penitence on the one side is not met by perfect frankness on the other, there is no real reconciliation from which confidence can grow anew. This, I say, is a part of the doctrine of the cost of forgiveness which lies well within our earthly experience; and by it we may gain some better apprehension of Jesus' heavenly teaching of the sacrifice necessary for the divine forgiveness of the world. These several elements of the cost which we may know in forgiving one another's debts must enter in full and perfect truth into God's forgiveness of us. He cannot forgive off-hand any more than we can. We should have no respect for the man who could forgive as easily as not. We would not trust the man who could smile at every injury, bow acquiescence at any insult, and offer his pardon even to the man who was slandering or robbing him. We should justly doubt as a spurious thing a human forgiveness which had been reached at no cost of suffering for the wrong which had been inflicted. By this great price often of men's forgiveness of one another's sins,

we may gain some human knowledge of the divine necessity of the Cross. God's pain over this whole world's cruel sin is realized on the Cross. We can see in Christ's death how our sin has hurt God's heart. He lets us see this, that He may *truthfully* forgive us. He shows us through Christ's sufferings how hurtful our sin is, that He may *honestly* forget it. The Cross of Christ is the means and the pledge of the genuineness of God's forgiveness of the sin of the world. By such suffering, and after such revelation of suffering for sin, God can truthfully and with a perfect honesty, both forgive and forget all who will be reconciled to himself. So much of the divine secret of atoning love we may obtain some glimpse of through our experience of human forgiveness and its cost to true hearts.

We have been finding thus some near and real elements of the gospel of God's forgiveness of our sins through Christ, and at such cost of his sufferings, as we have been searching the truths which lie within our human experience of forgiveness. I

would not forget, indeed, that there are more heavenly aspects and relations of Christ's life and death which reach Godwards beyond our definite conceptions of them; nor would I deny the reasonable use in their place and time of our more scholastic attempts to understand the divine method and means of our forgiveness. The profit, however, of many theological systems consists in the exercise of Christian reason in building them, more than in their value after they are done. It is well for the mind of the church to be always theologizing, always seeking to systematize divine truths, provided it is humble and teachable enough of the Spirit to be ready to begin to make another and better system so soon as any one which it has been at work over, is done. But while theories of the atonement have their appropriate place and use, the fact of the divine forgiveness, which we may approach through our human experience, is too great and glorious to be comprehended by any plan of our making. And upon any holy mount of Christian life, where the Son of

man becomes to faith the transfigured revelation of God, our little systems of divinity are as impertinent as were the tabernacles which Peter proposed to build, not knowing what he said. Whenever any experience of life and love opens to faith the indwelling glory of Divinity, it is truer and worthier for us to fall on our faces and worship. So the true heart of the Christian church in its highest communion with the Christ, and in its holiest hours, has risen above its tabernacles of creed and system and worshipped the Divine Love which so loved the world.

And to common men in their every-day life, the gospel of forgiving love may have access, if we will receive it simply and truly through our best and worthiest experience of life. It is still the Son of man who is to show us the Father. And the Son of man, if we will but follow him on this earth, has ever his more heavenly things of God to suggest to us.

In the possession and exercise of the forgiving spirit of the Son of man, as you realize the daily need of it, and discover

the moral cost of it, you may gain some real, though simple and elemental knowledge of what your God would do for you, and of how much you owe to his sacrifice of himself for you in his Christ. So an apostle would know Christ in the fellowship of his sufferings. And if in this short world we gain some elemental knowledge of divinity through vital sympathy with the Spirit of the Lord, then although the creeds which we take from earth to heaven be very short and very childlike, we shall be prepared in our own hearts after death for further revelations and increasing knowledge of the Holy and infinitely lovable God, who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. But if through Christlike sympathy of life we will not learn here on this earth these elements of his Divinity, in what other world can we expect to gain them?

VI.

JESUS' ARGUMENT FOR IMMORTALITY.

*Now he is not the God of the dead, but of the living :  
for all live unto him. — LUKE xx. 38.*

## VI.

### JESUS' ARGUMENT FOR IMMORTALITY.

IN forming his personal creed, or working-theory of life, no man who is not brutal will consent to put from him the thought of his individual immortality. For it must make a vast difference not only with the color of our happiness, but also with the substance of our conduct, if we are to plan and work only for some seventy years of life, or for ages and ages of existence. The spacious universe becomes to me an ever fresh and fascinating study, if I am to be permitted not only for a few wondering years, and at this earthly distance, to gaze at its glorious constellations, but if I am always to be somewhere an interested and active spectator amid its endless processes of life and light.

Immortality haunts like a presence the

heart of man. The human reason stands questioning before this double mystery of our being, Am I made to live always, and what shall be my life in the hereafter? Are the dead raised, and with what body do they come?

In pursuance of the same human method of faith by which in previous sermons I have sought to gain some real apprehension of other spiritual truths, we have now to approach reverently this belief in our future life. With reference to other doctrines I have been saying that the heavenly truths are to be grasped by their near, earthly ends; and that if we do not gain some firm hold of them in their actual contacts with our present life, our religion will lack reality, and our beliefs be but a procession of abstractions. This same simple and human method of apprehending divine truths will not fail us—I think it may prove particularly timely and helpful—in our effort to grasp the truth of our personal immortality. We may lay hold of the far unknown through that nearer part of it which becomes known

in our present life. We may apprehend our future life by the true, or eternal kind of life, of which the noble souls may begin now to have some experience. We know what light is in the remotest star by the beam which enters our chamber. We may have in the truth of present experience some known and verifiable foregleam of our immortality, although we cannot measure the full flood and splendor of the eternity around time in which we have our being.

I shall have to speak, accordingly, in this manner, first, of the fact of life beyond death, and then somewhat of the nature of that life in the world to come. Our text indicates Jesus' real and human method of teaching on this subject. It shows how the Master would have men grasp the hope of their future existence through the truth of their present knowledge of life. Jesus was speaking to certain Sadducees who say that there is neither angel nor spirit. Those Sadducees, you remember, were men who had lost all moral enthusiasms from their lives. Their hearts failed to respond even to the

note of patriotism. They were the political aristocrats of Jerusalem, who were indifferent to the wrongs of the people, and who had learned how to get the most out of this world on terms of easy compliance with the Romans. I need not describe them further; for perhaps the two best-known classes of men in all countries and times are, on the one side, the hard, bigoted, religious Pharisees; and, on the other hand, the cynical, comfortable, irreligious Sadducees. It is not surprising, it is altogether in accordance with the natural history of faith, that men like those Sadducees, who had become incapable of moral enthusiasms, and among whom the old Hebrew sense of the high calling of their nation had burned dim, should not have had souls enough left in them to believe in the resurrection. Faith in personal immortality had shone forth in the heroic Maccabean age of their country; faith in the future belongs to the sacrificial spirit; but those Sadducees were not men enough to believe in their own immortality. Now observe how Jesus met them. He stood

among them full of the consciousness of life — his soul the pure, burning focus of Hebrew prophecy — himself the life which is the light of men. And those sharp Sadducees, having secretly concocted, possibly in some club-house of theirs in the city, a very shrewd question, which might seem to throw the idea of man's future existence into popular ridicule, ventured forth — their small, shrivelled selves hidden beneath the fine cloak of their philosophy — to question and to put to silence the Man of the full, noble, glowing consciousness of life. How did Jesus answer them? By giving them a sign from heaven? But a man who cannot understand the sign of life in his own pulse-beatings has no soul to interpret a sign in heaven. God's pearls are not cast before the swine. Or will Jesus confute those Sadducees by causing Moses and Elias to appear? On the holy mount before worshipping souls heaven may have more to show than earth has dreamed of; but the Lord will not use his martyrs and saints as apparitions to frighten the sceptics. Or, if Jesus saw

the uselessness of trying to convince by supernatural means men who had not made fair use of natural signs, he might have met their curious speculation concerning the state hereafter of the poor woman who had been so unfortunate as to have had seven husbands, by holding up to their minds some better imagination of the conditions of that other world life. But exactly how did Jesus meet them?

He began by rejecting their speculation, and denying that the world to come must be like this world. That was reasonable. No planet, as we know, is like another. One star differeth from another star in glory. In the resurrection they are as the angels, not as they have been in this world. So far Jesus proceeded negatively with those Sadducees, clearing a little space in their thoughts for his positive affirmation of the future life which immediately follows. Now see how simple, and intensely human, and vitally real Jesus' argument of immortality was. The Lord made his appeal not to heaven above, nor to the depths beneath, but directly to

man's present consciousness of life. First he put his finger on a passage of their Scriptures: "But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the place concerning the Bush." Yet it was more than a citation of a Biblical proof-text, when Jesus repeated that Scripture; he would touch by it the chord of patriotism; he appealed to the Hebrew consciousness of life; he would kindle into flame, were it still possible, the smouldering sparks of their national faith in their fathers' God; and then instantly the Lord broadens his appeal to the universal, human sense of the worth of life, and he draws the natural inference from man's consciousness of life and hope in God: "Now he is not the God of the dead, but of the living: for all live unto him." It would be an utterly base denial, then, both of man's present consciousness of life, and of the living God himself, to imagine that the fathers can be dead, or that God is content to reign over a realm of the dead. Let us think for a few moments how simple, elemental, and sure of itself, is Jesus' argu-

ment for immortality from life and the Lord of life.

We love life; and it were a poor preparation for death to seek to love living less. We ought to love life more and more. We love life because we were made to live, and not to die. We love life because life is fulfilment, and death would be a contradiction of our whole being. We not only love life as a mere continuance of bodily existence, but as an increasing exercise of our powers, and enlarging opportunity of our being. We love life not merely with that instinctive striving for self-preservation which we share with all that breathes, and even with some sensitive plants, but we love life with a growing sense of its moral worth and possibilities of the spirit; we love life with a love which is an insatiable longing and a holy prayer for more life, and larger, for full and perfect life; we love life with a prophetic passion of being, and with a noble force of conscience thrown into our demand upon the universe to give us, in the body or out of the body, not death and

nothingness, but intenser, richer, higher life. We love life at first, it may be, with the flickering desires of childhood, and later with the firm and vigilant purpose of manhood; and as the years pass, and the evening falls, we should still love life not less, but more richly, in the calm and expectant hope of old age waiting on God. Love life we all do, and we should; and most of all should we love life as we go down through death. For we were made to live. We were born for life. Life, not death, is the higher law of our nature.

More than this holds good in our best experience of life. Not only does the animal instinct of life become in man a moral love of it; not only is life, and not death, the higher law of being to the heart and conscience of man; but also the will of man is a growing assertion of life, and an absolute denial of death. We see this immortal will of life at its strongest and purest in Jesus. The Son of man was willing for our sakes to lay down his life, but he would not be holden by death. Jesus predicted his death and burial; but

he would not think for a moment that he could lie down in the grave and be nothing. He meant to live forever. He could not think of himself as dead, having no resurrection and left abandoned of the living God forever, without part and portion in the world's coming Christian age and final redemption. There is a quiet, strong will and purpose of eternal life running through the whole earthly life and death of Jesus. And something of this will to live belongs by birthright and by baptism to all the Lord's brethren. It is the will of the Spirit. The best and truest souls have faced danger and death in the grand conviction that they should live forever. There has been often a triumphal will of the eternal life in human martyrdoms. And there is a power in this will of man to live which nature has to reckon with as with any other force. I do not consent to be nothing. If I can help it by gathering up all my energies of spirit in one focus of life, I will not suffer the universe to quench me. I refuse at the living centre of my will to the dissolution of myself. You may

kill Socrates, if you can catch Socrates. Let nature overtake this body ; it has still to overcome me. I will not submit my soul to be held in corruption. In proportion as one loves life, and begins to realize in what the true life worthy of a man's love consists, in that measure this will to live through death becomes clear and strong. Death will have to meet and overcome not merely these unstable combinations of molecules in this body, but also this more vital and steadfast power—the will of the spirit which is in a man to live and not to die. This will of life must be broken forever before a living soul can be held in death.

Nor is this will to live a human presumption, or will of pride. It is a will born of penitence and humility ; yet a will nourished, strengthened, and made firm by every nobler desire and true effort of a man's life. The will to live, the determination to go down through physical death in the personal will to live on, and to find or to make for one's self further conditions of mental and moral existence, is the will of the spirit in a man who is determined to

keep the trust of being his God has given him, and not to suffer himself to be parted from his own soul ; — a will of the spirit of a man to use to the utmost his powers of being, that he may not be overcome by nature, but may win his true and final place before his God. The will of life into which all love pours its passion, and all thought concentrates its energies, the will of life which must find eternal truth, and worship the living God, exists as a deathless force at the heart of every pure, noble, heroic life, and the true souls know it. This living will to live, nourished, grown strong, become a noble aspiration, amid the changes of this mortality, is itself a force — one of the great forces and permanent powers of known being ; — surely as real a power, and more vital and organizing than any of the forces of chemistry which may dissolve this body. It is a Godlike will to live which has already shown itself in this body to be superior to many of nature's lesser forces of disease and pain, and which sometimes seems to rise up, like one that triumphs, in the very hour and agony

of death. It is a Christlike will of eternal life which the forces that wrest from it this mortality do not overtake, and cannot overcome. There is something unconquerable by nature in the spiritual will of life. The Lord Christ in his death revealed it in its full power of triumph over death. His will of future life grew directly from his consciousness of the living God who had sent him into this world. His spiritual confidence of life is a clear note through his last words to his disciples and before his enemies: "I come again. I go unto the Father. I go unto him that sent me. Thou wouldest have no power against me, except it were given thee from above. I am a king." When did our Lord ever seem so living—a spirit so full of the power and the certainty of immortal life, as in those last hours when he went to his death? "Whom God raised up, having loosed the pangs of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it." He who had said, God is the God of the living—He who was the Life, living in its own perfect light—He who trusted his soul in death to God's

first and highest law of life, could not be holden in corruption. “Moreover my flesh also shall dwell in hope: because thou wilt not leave my soul in Hades, neither wilt thou give thy Holy One to see corruption.” In proportion as any man rises to a Christlike consciousness of life, and into the Christlike will to live, shall those Messianic words become also to him as the psalm of life. And thus it is the duty and the right of every man of us so to live daily, in such spiritual will and purpose so supreme, that we can go down to the grave courageously, not as into a great darkness with the flickering hope that may still glimmer in the ashes of natural affection, and as a lingering spark of aspiration; but in the glowing consciousness of love and high sense of life made for ideal ends of being, and with quenchless will to live and to know hereafter—a spiritual will for the eternal life which is itself a God-given and God-sustained will of life in death—the Christian will of eternal life and love in which, from the moment a soul is born anew into it, dwells the power of the Holy Ghost.

So many souls seem to have gone hence in full spiritual power. "I am indeed hovering between consciousness and unconsciousness," said Schleiermacher shortly before his death, "but within myself I am living through divinest moments. I must think the deepest speculative thoughts." We speak of death too lightly, as though dying could be only an experience of suffering, and not an action also of the spirit in meeting the new experience of life. To die may be not merely passive submission to nature's last necessity, but also an active participation of spirit in the great change, and an eager approach to the life opening beyond our sight. In the helplessness and the disenthralment of death the Scripture may find further fulfilment: "*Willing* rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord." And, "*The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*"

There is still another human and powerful truth in Jesus' answer to those scoffing Sadducees. Jesus, as we have been observing, had dared in many simple and

sincere ways to find God himself through human hearts and in the consciences of men. The Son of man shows the Father. The Son of man has power to forgive sins. Human forgiveness contains within the heart of it some secret of the divine forgiveness of sins. God's good intention is known through nature, and still more intimately in human nature. The same human apprehension of the divine purpose enables us to lay firmer hold of this high truth of our immortality. For Jesus teaches us that we may discover God's further intention for our future by our necessary idea of Him who is the God of the living. God has a plan for the continuation of our life in the world beyond the grave, because we cannot conceive Him to be the God of the dead in a realm of the dead. "God," said our Lord, and as though no more needed to be said, "is not the God of the dead, but of the living." What would a God be who could remain content to be the God of the dead? You men would not be satisfied to be lords of a dead world. It were no sovereignty

to reign over a cemetery. Shall your God be less than you would be? Can He be Lord of a dead and silent life? Not so, not so; the thought would be unworthy you; it were then a base denial of Him. You men may feel your hearts glowing with the sense of life; you may live with advancing power of life; you live at your highest and your best not unto the earth which may wax old, nor the heavens which perish, but unto God who is from eternity to eternity: so you live, and your fathers live; and God shall not be king of a dead universe. It is absurd to think, it is a moral libel to imagine, that the living God who has made you for life, and who has given you more power to live than you can find space or time for in any of your days or occupations here, would be content to let you fall back from his own Almighty hand into nothingness,— his image in you lost forever,— while he remained the defeated Lord of life reigning over a deserted realm of death. Impossible! The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not the mournful and solitary Guardian of the tombs of the

prophets; He is not the single living Presence walking alone in the garden which once was vocal, but which is now forever silent; He cannot be the Supreme Ruler of a world which death has wrested from his love, lost and buried in eternal darkness; — He is the God of the living; Life, not death, is highest law; Life, not death, is final Lord; in His presence is life; the fathers live before Him; all live unto Him; He is God of the living.

You see, then, the directness and simplicity of Jesus' appeal to the truth of immortal existence which lies within our present consciousness, and which gains power with our firmer experience of the worth of life. In still other portions of our present experience may be found involutions and implications of immortality. The "Intimations of Immortality," of which nature's great poet in our century has sung, could be discerned by Wordsworth's "vital soul," because they are the real involutions within present life of future evolutions of man's being. The poet simply listens to life's spiritual memory and

diviner prophecy of itself. It is not, therefore, altogether true to real life now to say, as we so often hear it said by worldly men, that we know nothing about the future life, and have nothing here to do with it. For the present is potentially the future. The world beyond is at many points of human experience a felt pressure upon this world. We know the future for better or for worse by the tendencies of conduct now towards further good or evil. What gravitation is among the constellations, we know by gravity upon this earth. We have some prescience of our future life after death very much as the child has foreknowledge of possible manhood or womanhood in its child-consciousness of being. Immortality, in one word, is the present spiritual implication of our life. The future life is naturally involved in present life. And along several lines of consciousness, and in much variety of experience, this present involution of immortality in our mortality is to be recognized.

Without following this truth farther now in any of these inviting directions,

let me rather put the method of the argument for it in a single analogy. Suppose one tracks a single sunbeam across the sky from east to west. There is the measure — the length of our atmosphere — of a beam of light. Suppose that you could look no further, and that all your knowledge of that ray of light were confined to your vision of it within the few miles of its visibility in our air. Very well, what then might you know of that ray of light? Remember you are supposed to have no perception that it is a sunbeam, but only knowledge of the visible ray within this atmosphere. Yet you would know from the light itself that there was more of it than your measure of it exhausted. You would find that it was some greater force than appears in its brief transit across our sky. You would discover that it did not proceed from below, nor return to the earth, although you could not tell from whence it came, or whither it went. You would analyze its nature, and common earthliness would not explain its being. You would be puzzled by it; it would be a

mystery of light, something in the atmosphere, yet not wholly of it,—natural, that is, belonging to the air, yet supernatural,—something not entirely to be explained by the atmosphere through which it shone. In short, the light itself in its passage through the sky would be evidence and revelation of something from beyond and from above. That ray by its own celestial nature betrays some further secret of sun or star. It would be unscientific to isolate it, and to say it is only a phenomenon of our air. And I see not why the same be not true of spirit, and of our spiritual experience of life. By that part of it which is known, I believe in that part of it which is unknown. By this earthly measure of our life, I believe in its celestial origin and its heavenly destiny. By my experience of life, in one word, I deny death. By the known nature of our life and love, within this earthly arc of it, I affirm its unknown continuity and completion.

Thus far I have been seeking to follow Jesus' method of teaching concerning the future life in his direct appeal to the evi-

dences of it in our human experience of life, and I have not touched the historical proof of the Lord's resurrection. Possibly we may need to learn better the simple human truth of what true, generous life is, and how it contains in itself the implication of immortality, before the witness to the resurrection of the Lord can lay hold mightily of our faith. Possibly before the miracle of the resurrection can show us its convincing power, we may need first to be taught, perhaps from deep experience of sorrow, how utterly unnatural death is ; how truly and perfectly natural life, the eternal life, must be. If we will but go and learn that earthly part of the heavenly doctrine of the resurrection, which Jesus would have taught those Sadducees when he gave them to understand that we live unto God, and that God's world cannot be a realm of death and a deserted world of graves ; then we may be prepared through such lesson of life to go also with the disciples to the empty tomb, and to receive as a thing not incredible their witness that the God of the living

did not suffer his Holy One to be holden by corruption.

It will be next in order to pass from some faith in future existence to that other inquiry which the sense of immortality presses upon our reason, In what ways can our life be continued, and what must be its future rewards or punishments? In contemplating these high themes we shall need with much caution of speech and humbleness of mind to seek for the present practical, verifiable portions of Jesus' doctrine of the eternal life. For this day let this part of the truth of our immortal destiny suffice; let our thoughts kindle and our hearts glow with it;—I am born for life, and not for death; I am not made to lie down forever in a dead universe, but to arise and to meet the living God. Noble, unselfish, sacrificial life is its own hope, and love its own security. For the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is the God of the living; for we all,—our fathers and ourselves,—they who are beyond death, and we who have yet to pass through it,—live unto him.



VII.

PRACTICAL VIEWS OF FUTURE  
RETRIBUTION.

*And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue ; for I am in anguish in this flame.* — LUKE xvi. 23, 24.

## VII.

### PRACTICAL VIEWS OF FUTURE RETRIBUTION.

I HAVE taken a fearful text because we need to learn how to take the fearful Scriptures into our working-theories of life. That would be an unmanly personal creed which should shrink from approaching the awful facts of life and destiny. The faith of the Church in eternal punishment becomes but so much religious somnambulism, if it wanders with unconscious eye out into the darkness and terror of the divine judgments. No honest believer will be content to be a religious somnambulist among the eternal realities. It were better to keep still within the light of one's little chamber, waiting for God's dawn.

Only that part of our faith in future rewards and punishments is real which can be brought home to the human conscience

and heart. In pursuance, accordingly, of the same method which has seemed to me helpful in our approach to other doctrines, — the endeavor to seize upon the heavenly truths by the nearer, earthly ends of them, — a principle of faith which I think is simply and profoundly true to the method of Jesus' conversations with men, — we are next to seek for some apprehension of the nature of the future life and its retributions. I attempt not the task, impossible to me, of harmonizing and presenting all the Biblical representations in one finished dogmatic picture of the world to come: I would venture rather on the humbler yet more useful endeavor of seeking to regain for the salvation of men from their sins, some real, appreciable, and practically efficient faith in heaven and hell. For if the Church of God is to succeed in our generation in restoring its doctrine of the future life among the working-powers of righteousness in this world, it must needs first pass through much theological repentance. In former times the church has both wrought and suffered incalculable harm by giving

over its prophetic Scriptures concerning the hereafter to the methods of the scribes, and by forsaking the simple, human way of all Jesus' teaching concerning divine and eternal things. It would have been sad enough, had the consequence of this mistaken boldness of the church before the judgments of the Eternal been only the crushing here and there of some tender human heart under a weight of men's over-beliefs too heavy to be borne ; but the worst of it is that the vain and sometimes violent attempt of faith to force upon the reason and conscience beliefs concerning the future world which men could not make real and right to them by their own heart-beatings, has succeeded but too well in deadening the souls of men to all preaching concerning the possible future retributions of sin, and even to this day imperils in the most orthodox pulpits the motive-power itself which at some points of direct moral contact ought to be brought to bear from the future upon the present life.

The history of faith in the future life has been not only, on the one hand, a

history of spiritual power in this world,—a history of revivals and missionary zeal,—but also, on the other hand, it has been a history of great loss to Christianity,—a history of doubt, suffering, despair, and often of intense reactions of human hearts. With regard to no article, therefore, of our creeds should the individual thinker be more cautious and reserved, and the church more teachable and tolerant. At no point in our Christian confession is controversy more unseemly. This high, half-revealed truth of the eternal life it is sacrilegious to lower into a standard of ecclesiastical warfare. It is almost blasphemous for mortal hands to seize this awful doctrine and use it as a club with which to beat their fellow-servants. A missionary Board divided against itself over this point, of all others, of uncertain doctrine, presents a spectacle of human folly at which the devils of mischief might chuckle, and over which angels of pity might weep. There are places enough in the life of this sinful and adulterous generation where the trumpet of the apostle of God's righteousness should

give no uncertain sound; but the trumpeter of our Israel is not to be tolerated where we walk with uncovered heads in the land of the dead. There Jesus wept. "I had rather," said an apostle, "speak five words with my understanding, that I might instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue." No more useful rule of faith could be found for our present belief and preaching on the subject of eternal life and death. The church has spoken ten thousand words concerning the future world and the final issues of God's judgments, which no men have understood, and which no man can make real to his reason and heart; it will be more efficacious for righteousness' sake if we can learn to speak but five words of justice and mercy in the vernacular of the present moral experience of men.

There are points of positiveness in Jesus' teaching concerning the hereafter; and there are also places where his words fall away from us into indefiniteness. We should study to be positive in our faiths where his great *verilies* rise right before

us, sure as the eternal hills; and also we should learn in our churches and in our pulpits to keep still, and to be content at present to gaze silently into the dreamy distance, where the Lord's revelations fail, and in the unmeasured depths the unknown stars are waiting.

This lesson both of Christlike positiveness and of Christlike silence we must be willing to learn in our creeds and also in our preaching, if we are not to lose from the life of men the whole motive-power of the world to come. For we shall surely fail to hold men to the eternal truths which they ought now to feel and to obey, if we recklessly insist that they shall grasp parts of our doctrines of them which may perhaps be mapped out in our creeds, but which no moral experience of ours can reach and realize.

The true emphasis of faith lies on the present, definite substantives, life and death, which Jesus contrasted, and of which already we have some experience in the moral processes of this world; to put the whole stress on the indefinite ad-

jective *eternal*, which takes its color from the nouns it intensifies, and which of itself is incomprehensible, is to endanger the substantive part of the faith in moral retrIBUTions, which may now to some extent be verified in the opposite histories of sin and virtue. Let us seek to take hold of Jesus' doctrine of eternal life and death where it takes hold of us, not where we cannot really touch it with our human hearts. This is to do what Jesus always intended to have men do with his teaching. For he constantly sought to put his words into real, immediate contacts with the living men and women to whom he was speaking. And his few words concerning the future life were words spoken by him when in actual touch with the consciences and hearts of men. What light there is in the gospels on the world to come, was light struck out by some particular and practical contacts of Jesus with men and their sins.

I think we shall understand better this simple, human method and aim of Jesus in all his teaching concerning future rewards

and punishments, and so we shall gain a soberer and juster conception of his doctrine, if we take particular notice of the circumstances and conditions which led the Lord to say anything whatsoever concerning the world to come. You will observe that when Christ uttered a word about future punishments he usually had been talking with men who had stood in their sins before him, and been hard and impenitent; and when he had a hint to give about future rewards, it was usually when he was talking with some discouraged or too impatient disciples. The Lord's doctrine concerning the future life was shaped to fit special manifestations and particular needs of human nature. It was never abstract teaching.

His revelation of futurity was not a finished picture set in a closed frame. His words were not dogmatic words fitted to a system. Jesus never lectured. The Lord never *Rabbinized*. He met men and women, and looked into their hearts, and from his large, loving wisdom he gave them the truth they needed then and there

for their lives. Hence the frequent paradoxes of the gospels, as real life abounds in moral paradoxes. There were exigencies in Jesus' life when he taught his disciples somewhat as a commander on a battle-field might instruct his staff, not in theories of military science, not in words made carefully responsible for all possible future constructions of them, but in detached sayings, and by expressions to be understood in the light of immediate duties: there are verses in these gospels which are compact as military orders, and it was intended that they should be understood by the emergency which called them forth. Oh! how the church has misunderstood Christ by calling him Rabbi, when he would walk with his disciples through the ages in the simplicity of his life and teaching as Master and Lord! Go back to the New Testament, and read again and again the words of Jesus in the light of the ministry of his life, and surely you must discover that the Lord had an immediate practical purpose, a human aim, in every word which he spoke.

We cannot know his doctrine, if we miss his aim.

From the many sayings of Jesus which illustrate this practical method of his teaching concerning the hereafter, and which show also our true way of approach towards this doctrine, I have taken purposely that parable which has so often been abused for ultra-dogmatic ends, but which is still a tremendous Scripture in its simple and direct application to real life. If we try now both to avoid the abuse of it, and also to use it as a parable for modern life, as the Lord himself first used it in his day, I think we may succeed in getting more of Jesus' lesson from the world to come into our personal creeds.

I need spend, however, but a moment in indicating the possible theological abuses of such fearful Scriptures. If we take the parable as a definite body of teaching concerning the final issues of this life ; if we seek to run all its suggestive lines out into an exact and complete survey of the hereafter ; we shall soon find that its verses cross one another, and its lines become confused.

Reading the parable literally, as we might a lecture to students on eschatology, we find a rich man who had died and been buried and was in Hades, having eyes, and power of speech, and feeling thirst,— all these bodily functions,— yet this all before the resurrection at the last day; and we see a poor man also who apparently without burial had been taken bodily to another part of the same domain of the dead. Looking at the parable in this misleading way of dogmatic definition, we see a great gulf and distance across which none can go to help or to hurt, but over which it is perfectly easy in ordinary tones to carry on conversation.

Interpreting the parable further in this foolish Rabbinical way, we have to explain these perplexities that a beggar, of whose moral character we know nothing, reclines in Abraham's bosom, and a rich man, who has not lost all touch of human feeling, is in torment; that pitilessness, which was Dives' inhumanity on earth, in Paradise becomes Lazarus' happy unconcern for suffering; and yet Abraham on the one side,

with patriarchal grace, still calls the man in the flame his son. Choosing with thoughtless haste to understand the whole parable as a representation of the final states of different souls, we are left with this picture of doom: a tenement writhing with sin and suffering within sight and sound, in the same world, of a dwelling full of happiness and ease, and that, too, not as the spectacle which we now must notice of contrasted wealth and suffering in the same cities, at the two ends of London, or in opposite regions of affluence and squalor separated by one avenue in New York, and which we can endure only because our hearts are hard, or we trust such contradictions in human fortunes cannot last forever; but—if we will insist in interpreting the parable in this dogmatic way—we must see this awful dualism between happiness and misery eternalized; this spectacle left as an always apparent and protruding dualism;—two places in the same land of the utmost contrast of ease and wretchedness always within sight and sound, but never within pity's reach of

each other ;—and this dualism of Lazarus and Dives, the one in Abraham's bosom, the other in torment, and each within call but not help of the other, regarded as the final outcome of God's eternal purpose of creation in Christ Jesus, and the end of the whole history of the Cross. So, if we please, we may understand a parable of Jesus Christ. So of old the scribes could interpret their prophets. But it is safe to say without argument that so the Christ could not have meant to teach his disciples. We may rest morally certain, that when we draw out the parable into the difficulties and moral inconceivabilities of this literalness, we have greatly mistaken the practical method of the conversations of Jesus with men. I put away from us, therefore, as unworthy, confusing, and contrary to the spiritual personality of Christ, all Rabbinical attempts to deduce from Jesus' momentary revelations and practical teachings such definite dogmas concerning the eternal judgments of the Father and the end of this world-age. Jesus

spake not as the scribes. Our Lord never Rabbinized.

Now, then, very humbly, very reverently, let us seek to understand what the Son of man would make us men feel and do by this tremendous parable from the world-age just beyond this. For this purpose, we must first put his word of teaching back into its living human connections. This time the Pharisees have been talking with the Christ. And upon one thoroughly bad trait in those men Jesus had fixed his eye. "And the Pharisees," we read, "who were lovers of money, heard all these things." Those Pharisees are characterized by their love of money. That love had become their consuming passion. In them the love of money, which, like other natural desires, has its legitimate uses, had passed the bounds of nature, and become the lust of money, which, like any other lust, may eat a man out of all heart and soul. And those lovers of money scoffed at the Christ. If ever in the love of man and the fear of God a human being has been called to speak the plainest truth

at his command, Jesus was called to speak some fearful word to those hard men. And he did not hesitate to do it. You and I might not have dared speak it; but Jesus Christ never was afraid. He did his whole duty to those lusters after money. We are not surprised that they wanted to crucify him, when we discover how severely he revealed those men to themselves. There is nothing so remarkable in all dramatic literature in which souls are laid bare, as were Jesus' disclosures of the master-passions of men. And what a gospel it would be to mammon in our day if human lips could sometimes be inspired to speak as Jesus could speak to such men!

So from contact with real life this parable comes to pass. It is like a moment's flash of light from the pure justice above directly down upon those lovers of money.

The last thing we may be sure that Jesus was thinking about when those men were before him, was how God's way in eternity should be justified. He was thinking of what those Pharisees deserved. He saw in the near future the inevitable flame

towards which such inhumanity was rushing. He wanted to make those men see in time to what inevitable pains and penalties their wicked selfishness was coming. The Lord was not cutting with cold artistic touch a representation in cameo of the last day, and the end of the world, for philosophic Christian faith nineteen centuries afterwards to take in hand and scrutinize. He was thinking of those wretched Pharisees who were lovers of money; and he would have been glad could he have made their souls turn pale at some revelation of inevitable justice. And for that purpose, and while he held those men under the consuming eye of his divine conscience,—this is what the Christ, the tender, the sympathizing, the strong, just, kingly Christ, did; and if there enters into the Christian church any man whose soul the lust of money, consuming as any other lust, has well-nigh burned out, this parable is here to-day in the Lord's Gospel for him, and may his soul shudder at it! This is what Jesus did for those Pharisees, and what more could his love have done for them? -

He painted a fearful picture fresh from their life. He took the vivid colors of it from their habits. He used the words which they could understand. Very dim and faded words they may seem now for our imaginations of the conditions of spiritual existence,—Hades, paradise, Abraham's bosom, the flame of Gehenna;—they are to us ancient words of the Jewish Rabbis. I have read pages of learned discussions over their meanings; but they were nursery words to those Pharisees. They were colors for future retribution to which their eyes had been used from childhood. The Lord knew to whom he was speaking, and what they might be made to understand, when he drew this parable from their vernacular. Nor did he hesitate at a single word. By one rapid stroke he transferred in a moment the present into the hereafter. He depicted with a bold touch the great reversal of human conditions—the beggar in Abraham's bosom, Dives in torment where the pitiless man richly deserved to feel what all his life long he had been quite willing that other men should

suffer. Gehenna was a known valley of consuming fire in those days. Jesus could be a fearful realist in his imagery for an immediate moral purpose. Were he preaching to similar men now, I doubt if he would go back to Judea for his parable of the inevitable future torment of present sin; I think more likely he would not hesitate to go down into the darkness of men's mines, or to stand before the furnaces of fire in their factories, to find words by which, if possible, he would make them realize what penalties wait for inhumanity, toward what torments sins descend, and how impossible it is in a universe made for goodness that wickedness and happiness can long live in a palace together.

Speaking in this great motive to those Jews who were lovers of money, Jesus continued thus: "And the rich man also died, and was buried. And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom." Jesus paints the picture, and without a word of comment leaves it to

make its own fearful appeal to those lovers of money. The Lord Christ will do all that his words can do for those hard men by drawing the severe lines of his parable as true to life here and hereafter in its moral inevitableness as words can depict it. "And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me!"—so the Christ keeps straight on trying to make those miserable lovers of money see what they surely are coming to, if they do not repent, and will not be less inhuman;—"And send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame." Ay! Send Lazarus! There was a man down in that coal mine, and even the crumbs failed him, and he died. There was a man faring sumptuously every day, and he died,—and his burial was worth mentioning. I can see still the long procession, going through the streets, and a brass band at the head. And just beyond death, where the clamor of our pride cannot go, lies another world. "But now here he is comforted, and thou art in anguish." Send Lazarus to Dives!

I think had I been a disciple listening to Jesus when he spoke that parable to those Pharisees who were lovers of money, I could have clapped my hands in exultation, and have fallen at the feet of the Son of man, and blessed him for such grand moral outspokenness to those cruel men. I wonder Peter did not break in with some expression of his impetuous delight at such brave justice. But uninterrupted by friend or foe, Jesus keeps on his grand, awful preaching of social righteousness and coming retribution. By one further graphic touch—that single line of the fixed gulf—he shows how impossible it is that any other consequences in the next world should follow wrong conduct here. One might imagine that the words of our Lord would have made those men turn pale to their inmost souls at such description of their cruel meanness and its prospect of future torments,—Lazarus the beggar there in comfort, and themselves in the flame, and not a drop of water for Abraham to reach to them across a great, fixed gulf.

But here the parable, thus far so simple, so direct, so fearfully true to human life and its inevitable moral consequences, takes a turn which is surprising. Jesus might have continued by urging those men in view of the moral certainties and torments of retribution to repent. But he stops. He gives the parable a different application. Perhaps while he was speaking he discerned that his preaching had failed. Such men will not be persuaded to humanity by fear. Moses and the prophets had taught them justice and social righteousness. They knew already well enough that it was contrary to God's eternal law to let Lazarus die at the door. Jesus leaves his parable to work what effect it may upon them ; — was it for the disciples' sake, and as a suggestion for their future preaching of the Cross, that he puts into Abraham's mouth a few words to show that men will not be persuaded by fear, even though one should rise from the dead to preach to them of Dives' torments ? The Lord's lesson lies here at the close of his awful parable for us to read it : If we

will not obey our law and prophets ; if we will not heed conscience ; if we are losing our heart for mercy, no message from the dead can save us ; we are doing all we now can to make our future hopeless. We can well believe that men so far gone in comfortable selfishness as Dives, men like those Pharisees who devour widows' houses, and are willing to fare sumptuously every day, although the people be damned, can hardly be saved by any words, though one from the dead should preach to them ; the only conceivable moral restoration of such men even to their lost sense of pity and the first instincts of mercy, might be by giving them a touch of such experience of flame as Dives was passing through.

With this revelation of the inevitable future torment of hardened selfishness the parable stops. It was meant for practical righteousness' sake, not for speculative uses. Other words of the Master concerning the world to come suggest much that we should like to know more definitely ; but they belong also to a thoroughly prac-

tical revelation for present moral purposes. Jesus' words concerning the rewards and punishments of the future life are clear, distinct, powerful, just at those points where we need to feel eternal pressures upon our present conduct; his words go in their immediate aim straight to men's consciences and hearts. His teachings are indeterminate, and stop, and leave our questions unanswered where we are still too young to understand God's eternal counsels,—and we are now too young to understand them; where also further revelations might only serve to confuse conscience. There is enough about the possibilities of future destiny in the Bible for our immediate use and profit. There is not enough revealed to justify so much hard controversy over it. What part of your belief in the eternal life belongs to your real faith? That part of it which you put now to some use in just dealing, patience, godliness, and true-heartedness. We would like to know much more than any man knows concerning the future conditions of souls, and God's eternal judgments.

But what we need much more just now is not to peer far off into eternity, but to have the Eternal Righteousness and Love get unmistakable hold of us. And that is what Jesus in his teaching was always trying to do for men, to bring every man he met under some felt power of the eternal life. Jesus was always holding up before men's thought of the hereafter, the divine eternal Right which surely shall be done, and the eternal Goodness which loving hearts can trust. Jesus took the pure, fast colors of men's present lives, — such as justice, mercy, truth, sympathy, service, pity, fairness, — and with these simple, yet enduring colors, he could depict, as occasion required, the rewards and punishments of the future world, and God's eternal judgments. And at the centre of Jesus' thought of eternal things, diffusing its light over all his solemn teaching, was the presence of the holy Fatherhood of God.

Following this method of Jesus, not venturing too far from it, we surely are led through present moral experiences which

contain implications of future rewards and punishments. We can see that sin by its nature hastens to torment. Wickedness plays even here with God's flame. In this world moral chasms open and grow wide and deep between the good and the evil.

In our human homes love will forgive and be patient, but it cannot endure undisturbed and unvisited sin. Love is too pure and holy ever to make selfishness perfectly happy. The near, earthly ends of this truth of divine retributions are fearful enough to make us dread further and final consequences of utter impenitence. All that we now know of good and evil confirms conscience in its prophesying of possible future retributions. We cannot take our Lord's awful parable from its moral contacts with our human experience of sin and its results.

In some further relations and applications of the future life to the present, this method of approach to this doctrine needs to be carried in a concluding sermon. I have been speaking to-day almost entirely of the darker, retributive nature of the

future, which constitutes a part, although the lesser part, of Jesus' teaching; there are also some portions of our present experience which are in vital contact with happier eternal truths. I leave this subject accordingly now unfinished. Yet to forbid any of those misunderstandings which are most apt to arise where our faith searches for the spaces of light amid the shadows of revelation, let it at this time be distinctly said that the method of thought which I have sought to follow into this as into other truths, belongs itself to no "ism," and declines to be called by any name. It is simply the desire and the effort to go back to the human reality and simplicity of Jesus' wisdom in his way with us men. I would rather gain for myself, I would rather a thousand times lead some other man into a profound sense and conviction of the worth of a soul, and the tremendous possibilities that lie before it on its endless way, than be able to persuade the whole intellect of Christendom to assent to some word of doctrine or speculation which may seem to me reason-

able or Scriptural concerning the world-ages to come. For to succeed in doing the former would be to imitate the Lord Christ in his moral teaching concerning the hereafter. Surely, surely, whatever our questionings or our ideas about the conditions of souls hereafter, or God's final disposition of our human history of sin, the fact that we are to live on and on, and that the only moral salvation worthy of God's giving or our finding is salvation from sin, and that now is opportunity for the beginning of so great salvation,—this is practical Bible enough for every man to take hold of, and put to immediate personal use. There is warning fearful enough, and true enough to present life, in our Lord's parable from the world to come, to make a man's soul shudder at the thought of becoming possessed with any lust; and at all the quick and sensitive points of our human conscience and heart, we may feel, and we should grow more and more conscious of, the grand, awful, glad, inspiring motive-powers of the world to come.



VIII.

POINTS OF CONTACT  
BETWEEN THIS LIFE AND THE  
NEXT.

*He that hath ears, let him hear.* — MATT. xiii. 43.

## VIII.

### POINTS OF CONTACT BETWEEN THIS LIFE AND THE NEXT.

WE are seeking to find for our personal creeds some vital points of contact between this life and the life beyond. I am aware that this simpler method of attempting to lay hold of the eternal life by those truths of it which may prove apprehensible and verifiable in our present experience, may seem somewhat disappointing and ineffectual to persons who have been trained to bolder, dogmatic handling of the decrees of the Eternal. But Jesus' general method in his conversations, as we have been observing, seems to have been to bring his heavenly teaching down, and to set it in the midst of the common experiences of men. So, likewise, his doctrine of the future life is definite and positive at those points

where it appeals directly to a robust conscience and a loving heart. It seems purposely to have been left indefinite, and the Lord's speech passes into the silence of God, when further words of revelation might surpass any power of our present experience of life to make them real.

Our text marks again for us this way of Jesus' teaching concerning futurity. "He that hath ears, let him hear." That was an appeal to men which Jesus was accustomed to make when he had pointed to some significant fact of nature or of human experience. There is a further lesson, he would say, to be learned by those who will receive it, in that portion of your life. There is higher truth involved in that common fact. You may hear in that familiar speech of life some diviner teaching, if you have ears to hear.

So in the particular conversation of the Master in which our text occurs, Jesus had drawn from nature with his rapid, free hand a suggestive sketch of the future growth of his kingdom, and the harvest at the end of the world. These are familiar

things — the husbandman's sowing, the growth and ripening of different seeds, and the final separation of the useful from the worthless at the harvest-time. And men cast the waste into the fire. Every garden has its bonfire in the autumn. "He that hath ears, let him hear." In these lower quite earthly facts and processes discover suggestions of the higher laws and principles. Nature is one parable of heaven. Find out you may, in the course of human life, something of the way of the Eternal. Earthly experience holds within it celestial influences, if we will note them. Human life is itself prophetic. "He that hath ears, let him hear."

Such is Jesus' simple, undogmatic, human method of teaching us concerning the more heavenly things. Moreover, it will help us to understand more soberly the whole Biblical doctrine of the world-age to come, if we remember that we now stand before the New Testament prophecy of the second coming of Christ and the end of the world in very much the same position as that in which the Jews in the seventh cen-

tury before Christ stood towards Isaiah's prophecies of the first coming of Christ and the future Messianic kingdom. If the pious Israelite had undertaken to deduce from the words of his prophets a definite dogmatic creed, precise in every article of it, concerning the future coming and kingdom of the Messiah, he could hardly have helped mistaking greatly the future intentions of his God. The later scribes, as we know, drew from the prophetic Scriptures a caricature of the true Messianic kingdom. And by the logic of the scribes the Messiah, when he came, was rejected and crucified. But, on the other hand, there were portions of the book of Isaiah the prophet, which might have been made very true and real to the people of Israel. His prophecies, though undefined in the glow of their high Messianic hope, were brought to a focus of flame against the sins of the people. And the devout Israelite might have cherished a true Messianic expectation, born of his experience of God's dealings with his nation, and answering the deepest truth of his life, although he could have conceived

only imperfect and confused ideas of what that coming Messianic world-age should be. In very much the same position, I would say, do we now stand towards the whole New Testament prophecy of the last things. Christian teachers who measure Christ's words concerning the future, as the scribes applied rule and square to their prophets, are very likely to become equally misleading guides to the kingdom of heaven. A book of prophecy has direct moral bearings upon the lives of the men to whom it is given; but a book of prophecy, from its very nature, cannot, without violence, be made over into a body of dogmatics. The Christian prophecy of the far, heavenly things is not a whole astronomic science, but rather is it a mariner's observation of the stars, true enough and practical enough to keep him from wreck and loss.

Accordingly we may seek now to observe some further points of practical and prophetic relation between our present and our future life.

We start thus to explore those sections of our human experience which are most

significant of our immortality. And I think we can most quickly and surely reach these immortal portions of our mortality through the idea of worth. What are life's real worths? What is of real and abiding value to a man in this present life? The points of worth in life are the points of outlook into the heavens. The worths of temporal things belong to the eternal. If this world and the next world are indeed, as we believe, parts of God's one realm, then when we discover something here which has worth for life, we find something which by its intrinsic value is treasure for the other world as well as for this. For heaven surely cannot be poorer than earth. Manhood keeps, while it enriches, childhood's good. The kingdom of worths then is now and here the kingdom of heaven. You see, therefore, at once how in this way we may both simplify and put upon a strong, fruitful principle our many thoughts and inquiries concerning the world to come. The simplest and truest answers to all such inquiries are contained in those parts of our

present life which are of pure worth, and which therefore as among the final ends of being must belong to our future. These present goods of our being may be distinguished into two classes, those general worths of existence which belong to us as men, and those special worths of life which may become our individual possessions. Let me next, therefore, run over rapidly these present prophetic treasures of our existence.

The first fundamental worths of human life are given in the kinships, or natural relationships, into which we are born. The human body is itself a gift of nature to the spirit. The human body represents a good of the creation which nature has reached after ages of the ascent of life towards man. This body, therefore, as a thing of worth, stands for some eternal, creative idea of our God. Embodiment, with all this rich contact with the external world which we gain through our embodiment, means something not only for this life, but for all our future. The Christian hope of the resurrection lays hold of this worth of

embodiment to the perfection of the life of the spirit, and without presuming to anticipate with what body we shall come, rests in the belief that the soul, once having attained to the positive good of embodiment, shall not in the future be left unclothed, but shall be clothed upon with some bodily perfection. In other words, personal life on this earth has received this double good of soul and body, and the next world cannot be poorer than this world. Heaven shall hold not less, but richer life than earth. Without dwelling, however, upon this good of life for all time for which the body stands, I wish to speak more particularly of those natural relationships which constitute so much of the present value of life to us.

The human family in its natural good belongs to the kingdom of worths, and therefore to the kingdom of heaven. A true human home is a thing of worth, and therefore, in some form of it, a thing to be forever. The logic of this faith is short, but it goes straightforward. If one chooses to deny any continuation of our life beyond

the grave, then of course the worth of the family-life also returns in his unbelief to dust and ashes. Death will then be regarded as the robber of life which steals this family treasure also of our being.

But the Christian cannot believe in the continued existence of the soul as something of immortal worth in God's creation, and at the same time denude that future existence of any intrinsic good which belongs now to human nature. This is only saying that while the seed contains potentially the fruit, the fruit must fulfil the seed. So that our Christian belief in the resurrection carries with it whatever in present existence is of natural worth. Now the first organic good of human life is given in the relationships of the family-life. The original sacredness of human life is not the baptism of the church, but the birth of a spirit into the human family. And we have no pure and perfect reverence for the family-life if we look upon it as wholly of this earth earthy. Fatherhood is the revealed nature of the Godhead. The infinitely blessed life of God, according to the

intimations of the Scriptures, is not solitude, but communion; and the partial, half-intelligible, yet real symbol for the perfect being of the infinite One is given to us in the Bible through the human relationship of fatherhood and sonship. The human family, therefore, is itself part and portion of man's Godlikeness; the sacred intimacy and perfectness of the life of a true human family is copy and image of something whose original and prototype exists in the eternal being of God himself. What is thus not altogether earth-born, shall not end wholly in dust and ashes.

In our century's literature of faith, shadowed by doubt, there is a pathetic passage, to which Mr. Martineau has lately referred, which discloses how greatly our eager human grief has need of the healing touch of this truth of the immortal worth of that life which may spring up in a true human home. In a letter which has been preserved in the memorials of Schleiermacher's life, Henriette von Willich, who had been suddenly bereft of her husband, opens to her friend the contending hope and de-

spair of her grief in such touching words as these :

“ O Schleier, in the midst of my sorrow there are yet blessed moments when I vividly feel what a love ours was, and that surely this love is eternal, and it is impossible that God can destroy it; for God himself is love.” But another moment the loneliness and the cold darkness are too great and deep for the woman’s sore heart. “ Do you know when it is that I feel the grasp of the sorrow too bitterly? It is when I think. In the future the old will count for nothing, . . . ‘ His soul is resolved back,—quite melted away in the great All; the old will never come to recognition again — it is quite gone by ’ — O Schleier, this I cannot bear! Oh, speak to me, dear! ” And Schleiermacher, who was then gazing into the golden haze of the prospect of a life absorbed in the divine, could bring back from Spinoza’s pantheism but little solace for that passion and prayer of personal life. Had our Christ but been there to speak to that woman’s grief one of his words of the eternal life, would not

he have answered from his knowledge of the Father, and made happily sure of itself against all doubt and darkness of death, this true prophetic instinct of that woman's heart, — “Surely this love is eternal, and it is impossible that God can destroy it ; for God himself is love.” He has said, “I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly.” That future life would be life far less abounding, if “the old is quite gone by” ; if our personal life in its richest kinships and companionships comes to no further fulfilment ; if the eternal world does not contain in its completions the full and rounded unity of those two lives which were once bound together on this earth, — that man's life of promise which had suddenly passed into the Unseen, and that other life, which had been left, of the woman who could write thus : “I bear this life while nature will, for I have still work to do for the children, his and mine ; but O God ! with what longing, what foreshadowing of unutterable blessedness, do I gaze across into that world where he lives ! What joy for me to die !

Schleier, shall I not find him again?" "O how is this poor heart drawn hither and thither by hope and presentiment—and doubt. But no; the doubt does not go much further than into the thoughts — this I feel as an eternal comfort, which does not vanish from me, our love was godlike, death cannot destroy it. . . . The last word which he said to me, when I asked him, if he did not know his Jette, was, 'Yes, Jette, my sweet bride.' O Schleier, how significant and how true; his bride, that I am." So human love, saying I am, declares its immortality.

But among words of sympathy for his friend's first grief, Schleiermacher could bring from the philosophy of the *Monologues*, which he had been teaching her husband and herself, only this disappointing solace: "There is no death, no destruction for the spirit. But personal life is not of the essence of the spirit, it is only an appearance." Twenty-seven years afterwards, nearly, Schleiermacher, the profound philosopher, the great theologian, lay upon his death-bed, and this same Henriette von

Willich, whom he had made his wife, ministered to him in his death. He gave to her then the cup of the communion of the Christ, repeating almost with his last breath the words of institution, and with a simpler yet deeper faith he said, "In this love and communion we are and we remain one." Schleiermacher's last word at that hour when he died, was the truest answer of life to love; for only in personal being is spirit realized, and personal life is realization of the very essence of spirit, and not mere appearance. Our personal lives in each other and for one another mean something forever.

These first sacred words of our present world—father, mother, brother, sister, husband, wife, children—are words that signify relations of permanent worth in our human life, and they signify therefore something for our immortality. And if we will not be impatient to bring the fulfilments of these holy Scriptures of our human nature down now to our too definite interpretation, as those Sadducees tried in vain to persuade Jesus to do, but

if we are content simply to read in these most human worths of life God's promises of future good, we may find at these vital points, in these quick affections, a wonderfully inspiring and assuring hope of our immortality. So an apostle, going back perhaps in his memory to his childhood in his free home at Tarsus, laid hold with one single firm touch upon the future life when he wrote, "I bow my knees unto the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named."

Around this inner circle of good which is secured in our most sacred personal relationships, widens the larger circle of the communal life. Men exist in communities. Human friendships belong also to the kingdom of worths, and therefore to the kingdom of heaven. The mutual obligations of men in a neighborhood, the opportunities of reciprocal helpfulness in a community, the many human inter-dependencies of the city, are not mere accidents of existence; they grow from the trunk of our human life, and in their fruitfulness constitute no little of its daily

good, without which no life could be so richly worth living. And in the Bible the blessed angels go in companies, and sing in hosts ; and there were three other-world strangers whom Abraham, shading his eyes, saw at noontime before the door of his tent. The primitive Biblical idea of immortality was not the thought of a solitary prolongation of individual life, but rather the hope of continued family existence and the perpetuation forever of the people of Israel. Social immortality forms the Biblical basis for the later, fully developed truth of individual immortality. And the last chapters of the Bible, with all their added wealth of revelation, remain still simply and profoundly true to that primitive Hebrew conception of social immortality, for St. John saw “ the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.”

That idea of social immortality is woven through the whole warp and woof of the Biblical prophecy of the kingdom of heaven. Even St. Paul, who possessed a marked and thoroughly independent individuality, and

who might have expected, if any man could, to go on and on by himself in the future life, does not think of knowing God as a solitary communicant, but prays that, "with all the saints," we may apprehend the love of Christ. That is the only way in which the Divine Love in its fulness can be known by any man,— "with all the saints."

Here, then, in the friendships and reciprocities of the community, is a broad circle of present life which also opens heavenward. The city contains its implications of immortality. Heaven is the city of God. One may exercise his imagination as he pleases in the endeavor to conceive possible future forms for the perfection of communities of men. Every star, for aught we know, may form one of heaven's future villages, every constellation be some resplendent city of God. Imagination in things spiritual will do us no harm. It may sometimes prove healthful and stimulating, if we do not insist in turning the poetry of our faith into dogmatic prose to be imposed on our own or others'

minds. But whatever may be our best available forms for representing the future life of souls in communities, this present substantial truth of the worth of our human life of friendliness and mutuality offers another real point of experience, by means of which we may lay hold of the eternal life. What the children in that city are playing in the streets thereof; what the men and women are doing in those many mansions; what the studies, the occupations, the comradeships of high endeavor there can be,— we may not conceive; but a life of mutuality and reciprocity, a life of comradeships, it has already entered into the heart of man to know, and to know as worthy of him, and as good for all the ages. And by this known worth of life, I would reach forward, and apprehend eternal things.

Our thought moves now towards a far wider realm. The last circumference of our individual life is not our family, our community, nor even our generation; it is the whole of humanity. We belong to a human race. And this race-connection,

likewise, has its worth. This human order of beings has its truth and good. The human type is one of God's eternal ideas. There is, therefore, something in humanity which is destined for everlasting perpetuation. As one whole, humanity is going towards the last judgment. This first truth of the solidarity of humanity underlies the Biblical teaching concerning man, and is constantly coming to the surface in different texts; but in our beliefs and discussions of the questions concerning the last things, this elemental Biblical truth is strangely overlooked. For we often think and speak as though our destiny were to be settled individually, and we were to reach our final state, each man of us for himself, without reference to the fate of the whole humanity, to which every man belongs. So under our too narrow and hard beliefs we would pulverize God's human purpose into atoms, and destroy the worth of humanity as one created whole, and lose the divine idea of the redemption of a lost race. Consequently we can think of each soul as going immedi-

ately after death to the final judgment, and reaching the eternal state, as though the man did not belong after death, as much as before death, to our human race, and could find his final place and perfection regardless of God's whole purpose and last judgment for us all. So we lose our grasp on these most human portions of the future life,—the truths, namely, that the individual life is bound up with the whole of humanity, and waits for the general resurrection and last judgment for its eternal completions; that God's harvest is the end of the world, and not the death of the individual; that Moses and Elias, and all the worthies who died centuries ago, as the Scripture at the close of that triumphal chapter of Hebrews puts it, are not to be made perfect "apart from us"; that the generations of men belong together, and go together towards the end, and shall come out together at the last great day; that all individuals shall find equal right and privilege of law and gospel in God's one conclusion of our common human history; that no man's *human* life can with any

truth be regarded as ended at his death, but can be concluded only in God's final completion of the whole volume of the history of our world.

There are, it is true, judgments for the individual, judgments of men preliminary and preparatory for the final human judgment. Crises come to men in their lives, and epochs to nations in their history. Life prepares for us hours of special trial and moral determination. And death, likewise, as the great change in the course of life, may bring souls to judgment. No man, we may well believe, can pass through the mysterious experience of dying without its leaving some deep and permanent effect upon him. We may conceive of such experience of death as the beginning of the end for the individual soul. But it cannot be the end itself, for we are men, and once having been born into humanity, we cannot die out of humanity ;—our individual lives are bound up with our human destiny. We have Scripture for it, that the harvest is the end of the world. Until then growth is not necessarily

stopped, nor moral processes suspended. While our world-age waits for its consummation, no man, whose life began in any age of its history, can be said to have reached the end and last judgment of his human existence. Our humanity as one organic whole can be no fiction to the God who made it, or to the Christ who took away the sin of the world. Nor should we ignore our oneness with our race in our personal hope of the hereafter, although we can but dimly discern its purport and its destiny. Distant ages, and the children of all times, are bound together in the one eternal purpose of creation and redemption.

Several hundred years before Christ there lived a ragged, worthless, idolatrous Amalekite. He with his whole tribe had to be cleared away from the earth that Israel might have a free space in which to breathe pure air. But that Amalekite was a man, and he belongs to humanity; and he and his tribe have part and lot in the whole history and redemption of humanity. Here in a Christian home eighteen centuries after Christ a child is born, and

baptized in the name of the Father. That child lives a brief moment, and God takes it. That child of the Christian home belongs likewise to humanity, and its eternal future is bound up in the whole history and redemption of humanity. God holds both those lives, and all the centuries of life between, in his one eternal purpose in Christ Jesus.

God's thought comprehends the human whole. God's education of this world is a race-education. And Christ died for the world. He is the Head over all. God means something, therefore, for the human race in eternity. What then, do you ask, follows from this for our present grasp on the doctrine of the eternal life? Very little, I acknowledge, if we wish to understand precisely how God is to deal with each and every individual in his relations to the whole history and final judgment of humanity. Very little, if we wish to anticipate God's dispositions in eternity for our human race. But much, very much, follows from recognition of this solidarity of our humanity and its worth, when we are

trying, in spite of the injustice of human history and a thousand temporal inequalities, to keep our faith in the Christian Being of our God, and the perfect humanness of his last judgment. Very much for the peace and the power of faith in the eternal righteousness follows, if we will hold fast to these nearer earthly parts of the revelation of the final judgment; namely, that all men shall appear together as one human whole before the Son of man; that God shall not deal with any man simply as an individual happening to have been born here or there, under such advantages or disadvantages of temporal conditions, but that He is to deal with us all as men belonging to one race of men, entitled by birthright to all good that is essentially human, and in his Christian purpose for the world predestined also to all that God may do to save any man;—each and every man of us, howsoever born, or living at whatever period in the ages of our human history, related by his human birth to the Christ of humanity, and not to be forsaken or cast out from our human

heritage of law and grace save as by a man's own sin against the Holy Ghost, he shall dehumanize and destroy himself.

I cannot tell, no man may know, how to that Amalekite who died and who has been waiting in Sheol these ages for the end of the world, and to that Christian child who went with the name of Christ on its infant forehead to the love of God beyond, the Creator shall be equally just and merciful ; nor how with equal will to forgive all that is forgivable, and to save all that can be saved, the power of God's love shall be brought to bear to the uttermost on all the children of all the generations of men before the end of the world. But, though in these far spaces the heavenly truths remain high above our reason's reach, they are brought down to our moral grasp in these nearer apprehensions of them, that God loved the world ; that Christ is the Son of man, related by his incarnation to all humanity ; that he tasted death for every man ; that his gospel is to be preached to the whole world ; that the harvest is the end of the world. And when we once re-

fuse with a holy conscience to let any man rob us of this faith in the universal humanity of the Christ, and the eternal purpose of the Father for his one created and redeemed whole of humanity; then, although many questions may be raised to which we can give but conjectural answer, we shall have gained a firm human grasp on God's eternal righteousness which cannot be shaken, and in holding which we are not afraid, nor our hearts troubled.

In the firm possession of this truth of God's eternal purpose for our human race as one atoned and forgiven human whole, we can go forth to work Christ's works for men without feverish hands, and no more in the nervousness of almost despairing hearts, but with calm confidence, and in that missionary strength and zeal which is inspired and enlarged by some sense of our part in God's great love for humanity, and his redeeming purpose for the world.

Then the missionary work of Christ's Church for humanity will be put upon a higher level of motive, and not be lowered to the hard, and seemingly at times almost

hopeless, task of saving a few heathen men from future punishment. Lifted above the doubts which lie so thick on the lower plains of motive, delivered from that despair of the world which might paralyze the heart of missions, invigorated and expanded to a healthful and manful love for all men, the faith of the Church in its Christ and his power for the mastery of human life, will go from strength to strength ; it will not lack hands to work and feet to run, at home or on foreign shores, wherever God's human opportunities open. The hope of the Church for all men will be some clearer and purer vision of that thought of our whole humanity which from eternity to eternity lies in the infinite heart of our God, — that divine thought for our humanity which was in the bosom of the Father and is brought near to us in the Son of his love.

I leave to your private thoughts the further discovery in individual experiences of points of contact between our present and our future life. Suffice it to say that each man in his special talent, his personal

training, his individual discipline, or his peculiar trial, may find the more definite points of attachment of his life to eternal things. The simple illuminative principle is this: take the idea of any worth in your life which you may nobly seek after, and let that shine as a great light before you, not low down on these earthly horizons merely, but far and away as a serene hope for your endless living.





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